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Resisting Transhumanism in Matt Haig's *The Humans*

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Abstract

Humankind has always pushed its limits both to survive and to thrive. The advent of industry, however, has accelerated the slow progress of its advancement beyond imagination to be further amplified with the advent of advanced techno-science later in the mid-twenty-first century. Armed with new possibilities, humans have aspired to be *Übermensch* ever since Nietzsche pointed this out, and *transhuman* ever since Julian Huxley coined the term in 1951. Yet, the worth of these pursuits or the questions regarding humanity's ultimate direction are still topics for debate, maybe more immediate than ever in our age of autonomous robots and artificial intelligence. Matt Haig's novel enters the conversation at this point, within the context of the 2010s, which witnessed a considerable increase and intensification in research and in both academic and popular debates about transhumanism. While the overall impression that these debates leave the public with is one of unanimous endorsement by all kinds of positivist authorities, inviting people to embrace a transhuman future outright, Matt Haig's *The Humans* attempts to introduce a pause to this narrative —if not a full-stop altogether. His ultimate argument is that perhaps the answer for humanity is in seeking to become not *super-* or *trans*-humans but simply to become contended *humans*, retaining and making one's peace with one's fundamental humanity. This paper analyses Matt Haig's *The Humans* (2013) as a response to transhumanism that resists transhumanist aspirations for human enhancement.

Keywords: Matt Haig, *The Humans*, humanism, transhumanism, utopia.

MATT HAİG'İN *İNSANLAR* ROMANINDA TRANSHÜMANİZME DİRENİŞ

Öz

İnsanların hem hayatta kalmak hem de gelişmek için daima sınırlarını zorladıkları bilinen bir gerçektir. Ancak endüstrinin ortaya çıkışı ile yavaş ilerlemekte olan bu süreç hayal edilebileceğinin ötesinde hızlanmış ve yirmi birinci yüzyılın ortalarında ileri teknoloji ve bilimin ortaya çıkmasıyla farklı bir boyut kazanmıştır. Edindiği yeni imkânlarla donanan insan, Nietzsche buna işaret ettiğinden beri *Übermensch* olmayı arzulamış; Julian Huxley'nin 1951'de *transhüman* terimini ortaya atmasından bu yana da *transhüman* olmaya öykünmüştür. Yine de, bu arayışların ne denli manalı olduğuna ve insanlığın nihai gidişatına dair sorular tartışma konusu olmayı sürdürmekte ve belki de otonom robotların ve yapay zekânın ortaya çıktığı çağımızda her zamankinden daha yakıcı sorunlar olarak belirmektedir. Matt Haig'in romanı tam da bu noktada, transhümanizm araştırmalarının ve hem akademik hem de popüler tartışmalarının önemli bir artış ve yoğunlaşma gösterdiği 2010'lar bağlamında söz sahibi olmayı amaçlar. Tüm bu tartışmalar kamuoyunda, her

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türden pozitivist otoritenin oybirliğiyle transhümanizmi onayladığı ve insanları transhüman bir geleceği tamamen benimsemeye yönlendirdiği izlenimini oluştururken, Matt Haig'in *İnsanlar* eseri, aksi yönde bir tavır alır —hatta buna belki büsbütün itiraz eder. Eserin nihai bakışı, insanlık için cevabın *süper-* ya da *trans*-hüman olmaya çalışmaktan ziyade sadece insan olmaktan mutlu olmaya ve insanlığıyla barışık olmaya çalışmakta olduğudur. Bu makale, Matt Haig'in *İnsanlar* (2013) adlı eserini, transhümanizme ve onun insan varlığının pekiştirilmesine yönelik amaçlarına direnen bir yanıt olarak okumaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Matt Haig, *İnsanlar*, hümanizm, transhümanizm, ütopya.

INTRODUCTION

Humanism, since its revival in the Renaissance and its elevation by the Enlightenment, has long been a guiding philosophy in Western societies with its emphasis on the ultimate importance of human beings. Transhumanism, however, provides alternatives to traditional humanist perspectives by intensifying them to envision a future where humans transcend —and, for some, transgress— their limitations, flaws, and imperfections mostly through the use of high technology and advanced science. Transhumanism throws the essence of humanity into question and proposes radical transformations that could redefine human existence altogether.

Be it the frequent mistake of conflating the two terms or the popularity of one over the other, transhumanism and the controversy surrounding it hold a larger presence in today's discourse than posthumanism. As will be discussed in greater detail below, the term transhumanism appears more than a quarter of a century before posthumanism and builds itself upon a long history of meliorist and eugenicist debates. In addition to its longer history, transhumanism appeals to a greater audience since its arguments address more immediate and practical concerns unlike posthumanism's complex philosophical arguments, one of the reasons why transhumanist fantasies find more frequent appearance in popular science fiction and dystopian blockbusters. In addition, posthumanism has a vaguer frame of reference than transhumanism. This mainly stems from its usage as an umbrella term that is frequently used to refer to several different philosophies that address the future of humanity. In this respect, transhumanism is also a posthumanist philosophy in the sense that transhumanism seeks to explore what is beyond human, in other words, what is *post*-human. However, as will be discussed below, critics are careful to distinguish the two philosophies mainly on the grounds of their contrasting views of anthropocentrism (Ferrando, 2019, pp. 27-28). Therefore, in line with the critical literature that will be explored below and as Stefan Herbrechter openly suggests (2013, p. 36), this paper distinguishes transhumanity from posthumanity and uses the term transhumanism to refer to a more anthropocentric posthumanism that deals with human enhancement and the term posthumanism to refer to a more critical posthumanism that deals with the de-anthropocentrisation of human society.

Matt Haig's novel *The Humans* explores both transhumanism and posthumanism. Yet, it engages to a greater extent and more openly with transhumanist ideas and fantasies. The novel follows an extraterrestrial being from a transhuman society on the planet of Vonnadoria who is

sent to Earth on a mission to prevent humanity's techno-scientific leap via a mathematical breakthrough (the Riemann hypothesis, the key to prime numbers) that will —according to the Vonnadorian authorities' calculations— accelerate human advancement beyond what is deemed safe —again by the same authorities. As the alien navigates Earth and human life (even though only that of the twenty-first-century Britain and the USA), it gradually comes to appreciate this species that it initially abhors and ridicules, eventually going against the aforementioned authorities' orders and advocating for the value of fundamental human traits. Even though the alien comes from an apparently perfect transhuman utopia, it chooses to convert and become human, a *he*, in the end. Ultimately, the alien's preference for an "imperfect" human existence over a "perfect" transhuman one makes up the crux of the novel's comparison of human and transhuman worlds.

It will be argued here that Haig's novel advocates retaining a certain notion of fundamental humanness in contrast to transhumanist aspirations. By comparing the twenty-first century human civilisation on Earth with the utopian transhumanist-posthuman civilisation on Vonnadoria through the eyes of not a human being but an alien who is enhanced in line with transhumanist aspirations, *The Humans* offers a critique of the pursuit of such transhuman desires. It clearly calls for a re-evaluation of the aspirations to become an *enhanced* human.

1. TRANSHUMANISM

Contemporary debates on the human and its exceptional position in the universe extend all the way back to Protagoras's dictum *homo mensura*, which declares that "man is the measure of all things" (Plato, 2014, p. 17). Against such immutability can be posited its poststructuralist rejection, which concludes that "man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end" (Foucault, 2005, p. 422). Just as there are different trends in humanism that spring from *homo mensura*, there are different trends in philosophy that address the meaning and manner of the end of the human being and what may exist beyond that point. These are generally categorised under the two interrelated but dissimilar philosophies of transhumanism and posthumanism. While the former views the end of humankind not as a conclusion but as the dawn of the new enhanced human, the latter adopts a more critical perspective towards traditional Western humanism and embraces the end of its 'remorseful' reign (Ranisch & Sorgner, 2014, pp. 7-8).

Posthumanism is not the focus of this study nor is it to compare the two philosophies, but, be that as it may, the clear distinction between a critical posthumanism and a transhumanist posthumanism should be noted, as explained by Cary Wolfe's following brief statement in his influential book *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010): "posthumanism is the opposite of transhumanism, and in this light, transhumanism should be seen as an intensification of humanism" (p. xv). What distinguishes transhumanism from posthumanism, then, is its obvious emphasis on human enhancement and (dis)embodiment and its technocentrism, which not so much breaks away from an exceptional human at the centre of the universe as seeks to intensify his position and his being (Dinerstein, 2006, p. 570; Coursen, 2011, pp. 417-18). This might be an important reason why it has gained a wider audience around the world and has been disseminated more widely than

posthumanism. Its popularity is also thanks to its more sensational and exciting programme and to its frequent appearance in science fiction and popular science. Compared to the more sober and critical posthumanist considerations (Mahon, 2017, p. 195), transhumanism "is exciting, enticing, cool, and sexy. Philosophers fantasise about the wonderful lives we are all going to enjoy […], and the media are eager to spread the good tidings and do their best to whet our appetite for our own terminal transformation" (Hauskeller, 2016, p. 121). Hence, the overall impression is that of a unanimous endorsement by all kinds of positivist authorities, inviting people to embrace a transhuman future outright and enjoy the fact that the embodied human being as they know it will end with the dawn of a new kind of human, the enhanced transhumanist posthuman.

Originally, the term "transhumanism" appeared in the 1950s and is attributed to Julian Huxley, who first proposed the idea in 1951 and then established it further in his essay of the same title in his 1957 collection of essays *New Bottles for New Wine*. In his essay, Huxley envisions transhumanism as both a pragmatist meliorist and a eugenicist programme where he sees it to be

> man's responsibility and destiny —to be an agent for the rest of the world in the job of realising its inherent potentialities as fully as possible. […] Whether he wants to or not, whether he is conscious of what he is doing or not, he is in point of fact determining the future direction of evolution on this earth. That is his inescapable destiny, and the sooner he realises it and starts believing in it, the better for all concerned. (1957, pp. 13-14)

Following this metaphor of man as the artist in front of a broad canvas, Huxley then places the human itself within that canvas as one of the objects of this (re)creative force. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, he says that although humanity's scientific and technical advances have opened up all kinds of previously impossible possibilities in front of them, "even the most fortunate people are living far below capacity, and that most human beings develop not more than a small fraction of their potential mental and spiritual efficiency" (p. 15). He urges humanity to seize upon the opportunity and invest everything they have in consciously realising the potentials of this advanced techno-scientific stage so that "no one need be underfed or chronically diseased, or deprived of the benefits of its technical and practical applications" (p. 15). Huxley regards human's current state as "a subnormal standard of physical health and material living" (p. 15) and hence maintains that transcending it is not only possible but also necessary and inevitable; it is "man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realising new possibilities of and for his human nature. […] the human species will be on the threshold of a new kind of existence, as different from ours as ours is from that of Pekin [*sic*] man" (p. 17). Evidently, the meaning Huxley invests in the prefix of *trans* is both a *trans*cendence and a *trans*formation but never a *trans*gression. There are three important aspects to his programme: that it is necessary and an outright destiny, that it will make humans and their lives better, and that it is going to create an altogether new species of humans.

The latent anthropocentrism of transhumanism manifests itself in its first aspect; in the fact that transhumanism interprets both the human itself and the human's world as humankind's artistic canvases and believes that this is humankind's unique destiny. Staying true to Huxley's original framework, later transhumanists, as Michael Hauskeller summarises brilliantly, consider "radical human enhancement [as] more than just an option: it is a moral obligation" (2016, p. 121).

Pramod K. Nayar draws attention to the same point by discussing how transhumanism reasserts the human's central position by imagining the future of the universe simply as a human *telos*, a sort of "myth of the white man's technological superiority and progress" to be achieved "almost exclusively through technology" (2014, p. 18). He then points out the anthropocentrism inherent in this transhumanist agenda (2014, pp. 17-18). Francesca Ferrando, another important scholar in the field of posthumanities, has a similar argument regarding the difference between transhumanist posthumanities and critical posthumanities. She states that transhumanism, with its anthropocentric agenda, "should not be confused with the post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic approach of (philosophical, cultural, and critical) posthumanism" (2013, p. 27). In a similar manner, Nick Bostrom locates contemporary transhumanist thought in the larger history of "[t]he human desire to acquire new capacities" by discussing such desires to be "as ancient as our species itself" (2005, p. 1). He traces the development of humanity's "search for a way around every obstacle and limitation to human life and happiness" beginning with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which accentuates the essential anthropocentric elements of the transhumanist thought. Overall, this means that transhumanism from the very beginning starts not merely as a philosophy that seeks to address the concerns and challenges humanity faces in the twentieth century but also as a movement that programmatically dedicates itself to a cause, a radical extension of traditional Western humanist exceptionalism (Nayar, 2014, p. 18).

The second aspect of transhumanism is its promise to make humans and their lives better, which might be its main difference from humanism. Benjamin Ross summarises this transhumanist argument by saying that "transhumanism is a way of thinking about the future premised on the idea that the human species in its current form is an early phase. Prophetic statements speculating on the bodies of future humans have a long history drawn from myth, religion, and scientific speculation" (2020, p. 7). Therefore, drawing its ideas from all sorts of narratives, transhumanists aim to create "a technological advanced 2.0 human that is distinct from our current 1.0 species in terms of longevity, intellect, and psychological capacities" (Ross, 2020, p. 11). That is to say, contrary to traditional humanism, which has no concern of reshaping or disembodying the human being, transhumanism relies on the conviction that the human being is lacking and that it can be, have, and do more if enhanced. The whole transhumanist agenda is "driven by the deep conviction that the present condition of humanity is utterly deplorable and a diseased state. If the human condition is the primary disease, then radical human enhancement is the cure" (Hauskeller, 2016, p. 121-122). Critical posthumanism also considers the current condition of humanity as 'deplorable' and 'diseased;' however, the transhumanist perspective differs from the critical posthumanist critique of traditional humanist exceptionalism and anthropocentric hierarchies. Unlike critical posthumanism, transhumanism retains human's exceptional and unique place as a species. It merely seeks to make it better, greater, and ever more powerful by primarily addressing human corporeality and its biological limits (Bostrom, 2003, p. 494), which, as Andy Clark in his article "Re-Inventing Ourselves: The Plasticity of Embodiment, Sensing, and Mind" tries to show, has always been the goal of humanity throughout human history (2013, pp. 113-14). Yet, it is never clear in the transhumanist programme what the measure

of human's deficiency or lack is. Hauskeller points out this contradiction by stating that "[s]peaking of 'making better human beings' implies […] that there are better and worse ways of being human. […] This means that there must be some standard by which to measure the quality of a human. But is there? And if there is, what might this standard be?" (2013, p. 3). The standard for being a better human is therefore nowhere positively explained or clarified in transhumanism. For instance, Benjamin Ross states that "[t]he goal of transhumanism is not only to create a posthuman with vastly extended capabilities, but to extend those capabilities to *infinity*. For example, while transhumanists are concerned with life extension, the horizon for this concern is a functional *immortality*" (2020, p. 167; *emphasis* mine). The two key words Ross uses, 'infinity' and 'immortality,' reveal the inexplicable immeasurability of the transhumanist goals very well. Similarly, Nick Bostrom is only able to categorise transhuman enhancements under two broad categories of "positive" and "negative" ones without being able to come up with a clear definition of these categorical values (2003, pp. 500-502), and elsewhere he delegates this job of definition to the posthumans of the future by concluding that "our ability to imagine what posthuman life might be like is very limited" since we do not know what transhumanist enhancements will really make viable (2013, p. 32).

Then, it can be concluded from these points that it appears that when transhumanists talk about addressing a lack, they are not so much talking about something truly lacking in being human as referring to dreams and aspirations for something beyond being human. In other words, rather than suffering from a true lack or disease, humans seem to be dissatisfied with being *mere* humans, and they seem to harbour an ambition to transcend. The idea that humanity needs to be more and to do more can be traced back, first to Friedrich Nietzsche's *Übermensch* from his 1883 book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and then all the way back to ancient idealist philosophers and their "ideal of becoming godlike" (Remes, 2016, p. 74), and this marks the third and final aspect of the transhumanist programme. The third and transformative aspect of the programme particularly emphasises the process of human's disembodiment and consequent breaking free from all his biological and physical boundaries (Herbrechter, 2013, p. 108 & p. 177) and the assumed inherent goodness of this process (Bostrom, 2013, p. 29). Apparently, for humans to have better and happier lives, they need to be immortal (Ritchie, 2011, p. 357) and become something other than or more than a human, and this will be realised thanks to the utilisation of technology (Ross, 2020, p. 171). This would mean that transhumanism needs to be seen as covering more than a wish or aspiration to transcend human limits, as, for instance, Faust did when he made a pact with the devil to obtain more than what is readily available to humans, or as Mary Shelley's Dr Frankenstein (1818) did when he sought to achieve something beyond the capabilities of the humankind. Yet, while these two examples do not register an attempt to become something other than a human despite aspiring to know, to do, or to have more, transhumanism wants the human to become something else altogether: an enhanced, disembodied, immortal, and autonomous being, which is basically an expansion of the fantasies "inherited from humanism itself" (Wolfe, 2010, p. xv).

2. *THE HUMANS*

As will be discussed below, *The Humans* responds to all three aspects of the transhumanist enhancement programme as laid out above in the previous section: that it is humankind's destiny, that it is going to make human lives better and more fulfilling, and that it is going to improve the human condition to a godlike station. However, the narrative's resistance to transhumanist fantasies is not of a philosophical posthumanist nature that rejects human exceptionalism but of a neo-Romantic humanist one that seeks to conserve a certain notion of fundamental humanness that transhumanism is ready to abandon.

In his final note at the end of *The Humans*, Matt Haig describes his novel as an attempt to heal himself and the people who experience similar trauma regarding their human selves, adding that this was "the story [he] first wanted to tell. The one that attempted a look at the weird and often frightening beauty of being human" (2014, p. 293). Meanwhile, at the narrative level, the unnamed alien-narrator writes a metafictional preface to his tale in which he directly addresses the silent narratee —its own kind on Vonnadoria— to instruct them in "the true value of human life" (p. x), and then he declares in the opening chapter that "[t]his book, this actual book, is set right *here*, on Earth. It is about the meaning of life and […] about how to become a human" (p. 3). That is to say, Haig's *The Humans* does not hide it at any level; even his title openly gives it away that the novel is written in praise of being a human. This praise is not exactly of a *homo mensura* kind that openly makes anthropocentric arguments but one that claims merely to celebrate the "frightening beauty" and joy of being human —albeit a privileged Anglo-Saxon male in the twenty-first century UK and US. As part of its attempts to celebrate it, the main plot of the novel concerns the narrator's own conversion story in which an alien from a transhuman utopia discovers the "uniqueness" of human beings and ends up worshipping their "exceptionality." As part of his conversion story, the alien-narrator puts human and transhuman societies and worlds on display and contrasts them with an obvious bias in favour of the human one. It is particularly through this comparison that the novel engages with transhumanist desires and fantasies in order eventually to debunk them.

To challenge transhumanist desires and fantasies, Haig first uses the alien's defamiliarizing gaze to document and appreciate the complex interplay not only of joy, pleasure, love, and purpose but also of imperfections, struggle, lack, and pain in human life in such a way that undermines the transhuman aspirations to become godlike by eliminating the "negatives." As the reader learns from the alien-narrator's descriptions, transhumanists seek to eliminate the seemingly negative forces and elements from this complex structure for the sake of enhancing the human, not realising the fact that it would also eliminate the dialectical balance of this complexity and the processes of creative struggle and self-overcoming. Although such a utopian vision holds intuitive appeal at first glance, its promise of a perfect and easy life without boundaries would at the same time make for a joyless existence of indolence, such as the one on Vonnadoria, where self and subjectivity evaporate. Secondly, and connected with the first, the narrative questions transhumanism's emphasis on rationality and efficiency in its programme to make human lives more fulfilling. Yet, without disregarding the role of reason in human lives, the alien-narrator highlights emotions as the true source of happiness and fulfilment. He compares emotion and pure

reason in terms of their necessity for happiness for the individual, and his experience of both worlds gives him the only licence of authority to draw a legitimate conclusion to this comparison, which falls in favour of emotion over reason and efficiency. Lastly, the narrative addresses the notion of human's destined transformation into transhuman entities and rejects this idea by way of the alien's ultimate conversion in the opposite direction, openly indicating a preference for the former.

The conversion story begins with the alien's mission to Earth to prevent a mathematical breakthrough by Professor Andrew Martin "who had just solved the most significant mathematic puzzle the humans had ever faced [… which] advanced the human race beyond anyone's imagining" (p. 16). Upon noticing Martin's achievement, the Vonnadorians immediately abduct and kill him and then send one of them to Earth under Martin's guise to infiltrate Martin's life and family so as to destroy any remaining evidence of his discovery elsewhere. At first contact, for the alien, humans compare poorly with Vonnadoria. Initially, he perceives humans as primitive and flawed beings driven by irrational emotions and self-destructive behaviour. In his initial account, a human is a "bipedal lifeform of mid-range intelligence, living a largely deluded existence on a small water-logged planet in a very lonely corner of the universe" (p. ix). He further notes that humans are "strange" and that the Vonnadorians "would be appalled by their physical appearance" since humans have "hideous" faces, "primitive external" organs, and "unfathomably pointless eyebrows" (p. ix). It is not only humans' physical presence that disturbs the alien but also their "manners and social customs too" (p. ix). Humans have strange customs like "body shame and clothing etiquette" (p. ix), and they speak a "primitive" language (p. 3) that they only use to hide the things they actually "want to be talking about" (ix). Vonnadorians know humans as

> an arrogant species, defined by violence and greed. They have taken their home planet, the only one they currently have access to, and placed it on the road to destruction. They have created a world of divisions and categories and have continually failed to see the similarities between themselves. They have developed technology at a rate too fast for human psychology to keep up with, and yet they still pursue advancement for advancement's sake, and for the pursuit of the money and fame they all crave so much. (p. 46)[†]

In a manner that caps this depreciatory portrayal of humanity, the alien-narrator announces that he is "scared" to be on Earth, to which the hosts reply: "*[y]ou have every right to be. You are among the humans*" (p. 24). As the story unfolds, though, the alien's initial disdain for these monsters/human beings gives way to a fascination with and appreciation for everything that is human. Through contact and interaction with Professor Martin's family, particularly his wife Isobel and son Gulliver, and with Martin's best friend, the alien starts reconsidering human imperfection and concludes that "that is what beauty was, for humans. Accidents, imperfections, placed inside a pretty pattern. Asymmetry. The defiance of mathematics" (p. 100). Although their lives were imperfect as compared to Vonnadorian mathematical perfection, they experienced joy and happiness more fully as compared to Vonnadorians.

[†] If not otherwise explained, the italics in quotes from *The Humans* are all original, and they are intentionally used by Haig to mark the Vonnadorian hosts' inter-galactic messages which are delivered telepathically to the narrator-alien on Earth.

A large part of the narrative functions as a sort of apology for humans' biological, psychological, and social struggles and imperfections as being indispensable to the complex nature of the human condition. The alien registers them in a range from their simplest forms, like feeling cold, to their most extreme forms, like experiencing death. He arrives on Earth naked in Martin's shape and is at first struck by the physical challenges of an embodied being: "The cold was a shock. The cold hurt my lungs, and the harsh wind beating against my skin caused me to shake. I wondered if humans ever went outside. They must have been insane if they did" (p. 6). For the alien, whose species has long transcended corporeality, being human on Earth is a terrible circumstance. He acknowledges that humans must deal with a harsh and hostile nature. Meanwhile, on Vonnadoria, there is "[t]he eternal light. The smooth, floating traffic. The advanced plant life. The sweetened air. The non-weather" all of which are "the simple splendours [the Vonnadorians] have grown up with" (p. 10). As the alien is further immersed in life on Earth, he struggles to become familiar with the other simple facts of human life like bodily care, safety, natural phenomena, navigating interpersonal relationships, manners, social etiquette, food, sleep, sex, work, and many more. The alien's defamiliarizing gaze on life's simple but incessant difficulties aims brilliantly, especially in the first quarter of the novel, both towards eliciting empathy from the fictional Vonnadorian readers and towards reminding the actual readers (humans) of the struggles, challenges, inconveniences, and all kinds of similar imperfections that they endure day-in and day-out and reminding them of the fact that these forces have become such integral parts of their lives that humans have forgotten to congratulate and compliment themselves for overcoming and surviving them. In light of the transhumanist agenda explained in the previous section, then, the narrative's celebration of the human struggle against life's imperfections as valiant undertakings and essential qualities of the human condition contradicts the transhumanist view of them as limits to be eliminated and shortcomings to be enhanced.

Among these, though, the alien is mostly struck with the fact of death, a concept the Vonnadorians have no notion of. In the opening chapter of the novel, the alien-narrator apologises to his Vonnadorian readership for mentioning "death" a few times since this negative concept sets a "grim tone" for the Vonnadorians (pp. 3-4), whereas for humans, the alien realises, death, and not only death but also the knowledge that one has the power to kill, is a simple daily fact (p. 191). Several chapters in the novel are dedicated to an exploration of these facts of violence, loss, and death, and this exploration is carried out in such a way as to strike the right chord in the hearts of both the real human readers and the fictional Vonnadorian readers exemplified by the alien's following remark: "[W]e may know brief pain, but this did not seem of that type. It reminded me that this was a place of death. Things deteriorated, degenerated, and died here. The life of a human was surrounded on all sides by darkness. How on Earth did they cope?" (p. 20). Such an appeal to emotion —or more precisely, an appeal to pity— by the alien-narrator continues when he refers to the fact of death to explain the failed human progress, saying that "humans have to read books. They actually need to sit down and look at each word consecutively. […] No wonder they were a species of primitives. By the time they had read enough books to actually reach a state of knowledge where they can do anything with it they are dead" (p. 18). While humans are patted on

the back for enduring a life of imperfections and struggle, the Vonnadorians are dismissed for not needing to face any since, for instance, vis-à-vis the example of reading, the latter can easily "pop a word-capsule" to "chew different tomes simultaneously, or gulp down near-infinite knowledge in a matter of seconds" (p. 18). As the story progresses, the alien-narrator grows to dislike such Vonnadorian comforts and, contrary to transhumanist goals, portrays them as guilty of killing the creative satisfaction that results from overcoming obstacles and imperfections.

In other words, the differences between an imperfect human world and a perfect Vonnadorian world are noted by the alien in such a way that highlights the unique resilience of the human race against all odds. While comparing the two species and their worlds, the alien-narrator admiringly designates humans as role models for their strength of character in contrast to the indolent Vonnadorians, not the other way around —i.e., in a way that would praise the advanced Vonnadorian society for having done away with such imperfections and lacks in the first place. Haig's alien-narrator seems to make use of every opportunity to praise humans and applaud "human life [as] an act of defiance" (p. 172). This goes as far as mythologising human existence in his following lengthy tribute to human life and its miraculous ways:

> You see, when you looked at a human's face, you had to comprehend the luck that brought that person there. Isobel Martin had a total of 150,000 generations before her, and that only includes the humans. That was 150,000 increasingly unlikely copulations resulting in increasingly unlikely children. That was a one in quadrillion chance multiplied by another quadrillion for every generation. Or around twenty thousand times more than the number of the atoms in the universe. But even that was only the start of it, because humans had only been around for three million Earth years, certainly a very short time compared to the three and a half billion years since life first appeared on this planet. Therefore, mathematically, rounding things up, there was no chance at all that Isobel Martin could have existed. A zero in tento-the-power-of-forever chance. And yet there she was, in front of me, and I was quite taken aback by it all; I really was. (p. 207)

Therefore, once again, as opposed to transhumanism, which seeks "to be a healer of humanity" (Hauskeller, 2016, pp. 121-122), Haig's alien-narrator sees nothing wrong with being a human as it presently is. Instead, he considers it to be a divine "marvel," the work of a divine and mystical power that transcends the mathematics that used to govern everything for him. Mathematics stops working when he tries to formulate and calculate human individuality and joy; human life is never as predictable, safe, efficient, comfortable, or logically correct as that of a transhuman Vonnadorian's, nor is human society. Yet, the alien finds more satisfaction and happiness in what remains outside transhuman perfection. It is, in fact, this quality of human life that makes it valuable, attractive, and sacred for the alien —i.e., its being limited, imperfect, unpredictable, and at times irrational.

As such, he chooses to become human by embracing its imperfections. For instance, the alien-narrator makes the following comparison between the two worlds to argue for the value of the fundamental human condition and to call into question the perfection that transhumanist enhancement aims to achieve. After relating the heavenly perfection on Vonnadoria, he continues to add:

> But what happened in Heaven? What did you do there? After a while, didn't you crave flaws? Love and lust and misunderstandings, and maybe even a little violence to liven

> things up? Didn't light need shade? Didn't it? Maybe it didn't. Maybe I was missing the point. Maybe the point was to exist with an absence of pain. Yes, to exist with an absence of pain. Yes, maybe that was the only aim you needed in life. It certainly had been, but what happened if you'd never required that aim because you were born after that goal had been met? (p. 174)

For the alien who has never experienced imperfection or struggled with anything, their absence becomes a problem in itself. Without imperfections to struggle with or the room that an incompleteness leaves for creative self-fashioning, heaven becomes a boring flatness. It neither rewards nor satisfies its inhabitants. This eventually becomes one of the reasons why the alien-narrator is drawn to human imperfection and moves away from Vonnadorian transhumanist mathematical perfection and certainty.

Similarly, he chooses to become a human by embracing its irrational aspects. When he takes Gulliver's revenge by viciously attacking his bullies at school, for instance, he says: "[o]n Vonnadoria I had never done anything so vindictive. Nor had I ever felt quite so satisfied" (p. 184). Acting against his better judgment and rational thinking, or simply put, acting with impulse and emotion awakens something within the alien. He feels good to have pursued self-interest and self-satisfaction, both of which go against his initial Vonnadorian perspective on the self or the individual and would be better explained by Nietzschean will-to-power. Elsewhere in the narrative, upon entering Professor Russell's home office, the alien remarks: "I looked around at all the certificates on the wall and felt thankful to come from a place where personal success was meaningless. […] I don't have a name. Names are a symptom of a species which values the individual self above the collective good" (p. 90). Yet, later on, after spending some time among humans and within a human body, he makes decisions that are not only very personal and for personal success but also very irrational and juvenile, let alone the fact that he enjoys doing so.

In the same way, he enjoys the unpredictabilities this irrationality might entail, such as the predicament he finds himself in after Gulliver's death. He feels a new kind of joy and satisfaction when he goes against all Vonnadorian logic to resurrect Gulliver by using his "gifts." When Gulliver falls from the roof and dies, the alien checks for his pulse and finds none; he concludes that Gulliver "was dead" (p. 170). With his super-senses, he notices that Gulliver's body temperature is already dropping, and he thinks that "[r]ationally, [he] should have resigned [himself] to this fact" (p. 170). Yet, he finds that he cannot let go; and he notes: "I knew that the whole of human history was full of people who tried against the odds. Some succeeded, most failed, but that hadn't stopped them. Whatever else you could say about these particular primates, they could be determined. And they could hope" (p. 170). Then, he once again prefers emotion to rationality:

> And hope was often irrational. It made no sense. If it had made sense it would have been called, well, sense. The other thing about hope was that it took effort, and I had never been used to effort. At home, nothing had been an effort. That was the whole point of home, the comfort of a perfectly effortless existence. Yet there I was. Hoping. Not that I was standing there, passively, just wishing him better from a distance. Of course not. I placed my left hand – my gift hand – to his heart, and I began to work. (p. 171)

With this incident, the alien is ultimately attempting to prove its readers —both the real human readers and the fictional Vonnadorian ones— that the individual, his personal needs, or his

personal benefits might get prioritised and that there is more to life than mathematical certainty, efficiency, rationality, and logic. Therefore, once again, the narrative goes against transhumanist beliefs and objectives. It argues that the fact that something seems irrational, senseless, or illogical does not directly necessitate or prove the need for its elimination, nor should this elimination necessarily be considered an enhancement for the better.

Finally, he chooses to become a human by embracing its ultimate biological limits. Indeed, on the first morning of his irreversible conversion into a human being, the alien makes the following note: "I awoke feeling terrible. My eyes itched with tiredness. My back was stiff. There was a pain in my knee, and I could hear a mild ringing. Noises that belonged below a planet's surface were coming from my stomach. Overall, the sensation I was feeling was one of conscious decay. In short, I felt human" (p. 196). Contrary to transhumanism, which views decay as a biological limit, the alien does not regret his choice. His highly neutral and brief statement at the end of the quote indicates that to slowly decay is merely and in point of fact what it means to be a human: it is not something to deny, change, or eliminate but something to embrace in a way to make one's peace with one's own and essential humanity. This is further explored in a chapter entitled "Where we are from" in which the alien compares human society with that of Vonnadoria (pp. 95-96). Epitomising the transhumanist aspirations for godlike existence, the members of the Vonnadorian society in the novel are all-knowing, omnipresent, immortal, and self-sufficient. They have long done away with necessity, sustenance, limits, or concerns of corporeality; they have only two, and for that matter, godlike concerns: "[t]he advancement of mathematics and the security of the universe" (p. 269). The transhumanist plan for humankind, with his limitless ambitions —the sources of which Irina Deretić finds in Protagoras' mythos (2016, pp. 22-24 & passim)—, is to radically transgress all boundaries to re-imagine and re-create himself as just that, a god. Indeed, Hauskeller argues that transhumanists would actually "prefer to be gods rather than cyborgs" (2016, p. 163). Pauliina Remes (2016) explains the ideal to become godlike as a desire to become an "invulnerable being untouched by worldly desires and contingencies" (p. 74). Yet, she suspects it is "a breach of categories" and "an unrealistic and inhumane ideal to become another kind of creature" (p. 74). Remes continues to criticise this ideal, saying, "[o]ne may wonder what the ethical benefits of such a goal are: The best life for human beings would be a life that actually does not resemble a human living at all, and would not, thus, be an actualisation of humanity or its best part, but an abandonment of it" (p. 74). When the alien gives up his godlike immortality and purposefully embraces human decay, then, the narrative makes its human readers question the validity and desirability of the whole transhumanist agenda. After all, as Remes has it and the alien-narrator would like the reader to acknowledge, this breach of categories may lead humanity to ruin, contrary to what transhumanists envision: if there is no joy beyond that point of no return, no love, or no self, would it not make heaven into a prison house of predictability and loneliness?

As such, after contrasting the two worlds, the alien-narrator gives up all his powers, comfort, and immortality to live a life on Earth —which equals merely the blink of an eye compared to eternity— among the people whom he now considers to be his family. When the hosts call him and say that "*[he] must come home*," he refuses to abide because, he says, "[he] never had a family"

on Vonnadoria (p. 178). He chooses human mortality *for* its imperfections and limits because the complexity they provide for an individual makes him happier or, as he likes to quote Emily Dickinson, his favourite poet: "That it will never come again, Is what makes life so sweet" (p. 206). He chooses the "warmth" he feels when he experiences solidarity with other human beings in the face of the imperfections and struggles attached to the human condition. He relates "the pathos of […] being a mortal creature who was essentially alone but needed the myth of togetherness with others. Friends, children, lovers. […] It was a myth you could easily inhabit" (p. 148). His resolution at the end of the novel sums up his conversion:

> [D]istant suns and planets shone above me, like a giant advert for better living. On other, more enlightened planets, there was the peace and calm and logic that so often came with advanced intelligence. I wanted none of it, I realised. What I wanted was that most exotic of all things. I had no idea if that was possible. It probably wasn't, but I needed to find out. I wanted to live with people I could care for and who would care for me. I wanted family. I wanted happiness, not tomorrow or yesterday, but now. What I wanted, in fact, was to go home. (pp. 290-291)

Clearly, the advert that the alien is talking about is an advert for an enhanced transhumanist future like that of Vonnadoria. The fact that he gives up the transhumanist promise of happiness for "tomorrow" and opts for the sort of happiness he can find "now" in his imperfect human life and with his family at home becomes the ultimate verdict of the narrative on the transhumanist enhancement programme. In that sense, the alien-narrator's resolution exposes the quasi-universals of transhumanist arguments as mere assumptions and points out the inherent controversies of trying to determine an entire species' perception of happiness.

Although the life on Vonnadoria depicted by the alien seems to have satisfied all the fantasies of transhumanism as laid out in the previous section, it still falls short of producing a "happy" society. The alien-narrator's discrediting depictions of his own transhumanist society align well with critics of transhumanism such as Michael Hauskeller who criticises transhumanism's techno-reductionism by saying that "[i]t is assumed that we already know the end and we all agree on the desirability of it, so that we only need to discover the appropriate means for achieving it. In other words, even if we do not yet know how to make better humans, we *do* know what would make a better human. But do we really?" (2013, p. 3). Indeed, arguments for the desirability of human enhancement appear to rely on the premise that "individuals will regard their own quality of life as higher when their emotional, physical, and intellectual abilities are enhanced and their healthspans are extended. Whoever commands greater capacities and remains alive longer in a healthy condition generally leads a more comfortable life" (Sorgner, 2020, p. 12). Yet, Hauskeller once again argues, "we cannot, or should not, think of the better human as the (in a subjective sense of the word) *happy* human" (2013, p. 187, *emphasis* original). Hauskeller is suspicious of the transhumanist promise to make human lives 'wonderful beyond imagination,' and, he states, "even if they will be one day, in the sense that all worries and all suffering will have vanished from human experience, it is not obvious that this would be good for us" (2013, p. 187).

It is suggested in the narrative that it is not evident if a transhumanist revolution would in fact bring fulfilment or happiness since, as exemplified by the alien's disavowal of his "perfect" society, in the hopes of providing a happier and more fulfilling life for humans by removing limits

and imperfections, that revolution would at the same time eradicate, together with those limits and imperfections, the joy, pleasure, love, caring, and empathy that exist as their complements to make up a complex totality. Their removal is seen to disrupt the dialectical balance and rhythm of the human condition, which arranges itself in complementary opposites by replacing it with a monistic version that eliminates certain forces and conditions within that complexity with a dedicated belief in the validity of its choices. The alien discusses this with Gulliver at the end of the novel and describes Vonnadoria as follows:

> Well, just existing is different. No one dies. There's no pain. Everything is beautiful. The only religion is mathematics. There are no families. There are the hosts – they give instructions – and there is everyone else. The advancement of mathematics and the security of the universe are the two concerns. There is no hatred. There are no fathers and sons. There is no clear line between biology and technology. And everything is violet. […] It's dull. It's the dullest life you can imagine. Here, you have pain, and loss, that's the price. But the rewards can be wonderful Gulliver. (p. 269)

Without the price, there seems to be no reward; where there is no imperfection or necessity, there is also no satisfaction or happiness. Haig seems to be arguing —incorporating Lacanian and Nietzschean concepts in the background of his notion of *human*— that without desire, a will-to-power, or some creative struggle, there is no human self or subject. Tomáš Sigmund (2021) argues for similar conditions that are necessary for subjectivity by referring to Hannah Arendt's philosophy. He states that although transhumanism considers the human condition to be "loaded with necessities and duties" and although it promises to "provid[e] man with the full autonomy, removing every necessity and barrier to his free will," those barriers, necessities, and duties are what makes us human (p. 65). He points out that humans need those necessities and duties so that they can act upon them because "[m]en are free as long as they act. Action means the ability to begin something new. […] Action includes both speech and action and allows man to disclose himself to others and to distinguish from others as a unique individual" (p. 66). Therefore, Sigmund concludes, "[t]ranshumanists have lost the respect for intentionality, bodily existence, freedom, involvement and other phenomena that characterise human existence in the world" (p. 76). The overall argument of the comparison is hence that although the transhumanist programme envisions and promises a better future for humanity, becoming transhuman seems to lead to a "transgression, or a point of no return from which humanity will suffer a most grievous, irretrievable loss" (Lilley, 2013, p. 18). What is transgressed and lost in the process is nothing other than human subjectivity and humankind's fundamental humanity, which, in the eyes of the transhuman alien-narrator, are in fact the most rewarding and valuable aspects of the human world.

In addition to these aspects of being human, the narrative addresses the notion of human emotions. The alien-narrator slowly discovers that humans' remedies for the struggles of being human are emotions. He learns that above everything else, humans rely on emotions to survive and thrive. In contrast to their absence in life on Vonnadoria, which is ruled by pure "*mathematical certainty*" and "*logic*" that always define "*what needs to be done*" (p. 46), the alien notes that "emotions have a logic. Without emotions humans wouldn't care for each other, and if they didn't care for each other the species would have died out. To care for others is self-preservation. You

care for someone and they care for you" (pp. 177-178). The alien first notices humans' care for each other and how their emotions bind them together when he kills Professor Martin's rival colleague Professor Russell. The reader learns that Russell must be disposed of because apparently Martin had sent the proof of his mathematical discovery to Russell just before he was abducted. In this scene, while Russell's wife is trying helplessly to tend to her dying husband on the floor, the alien thinks that

> [a]s I watched her I felt a strange sensation. A kind of longing for something, a craving, but for what I had no idea. I was mesmerised by the sight of this human female crouched over the man […] His head was on her knee. She kept caressing his face. So this was love. Two life forms in mutual reliance. I was meant to be thinking I was watching weakness, something to scorn, but I wasn't thinking that at all. (pp. 93-94)

Faced with human love and care, which are romantically depicted as immeasurable, the alien finds it difficult to interpret this human quality at first. More importantly, he registers a lack in his own life; a lack he had not known existed. Later, the alien himself experiences similar emotions when Isobel treats and dresses his wounds after Gulliver attacks the alien while sleepwalking. The alien notes his satisfaction in being taken care of and says: "[…] she had cared for me. No one in the universe cared for me. (You didn't did you?) We had technology to care for us now, and we didn't need emotions. We were alone. We worked together for our preservation but emotionally we needed no one. We just needed the purity of mathematical truth" (pp. 127-128). The alien-narrator further explains: "[i]t still felt strange, and new, having someone be worried about me. I didn't fully understand this concern, or what she gained by having it, but I must confess I quite liked being the subject of it" (p. 153).

As the alien states, even though human love and care are at odds with Vonnadorian mathematical logic, such emotions slowly conquer the alien, without it fully realising what was happening (p. 109). In the end, it becomes emotions that make the alien, who "belong[s] to the most advanced race in the known universe" (p. 9), regard humans as superior and admirable beings and give everything up and convert to the human side. This, in a quite heroic and victorious gesture reminiscent of romances where the hero saves the girl and saves the day, leads to the alien defying the Vonnadorian hosts. Even though the hosts insist that Isobel and Gulliver need to be killed since mathematical certainty requires so, the alien lets his newly-found emotions guide him and ends up refusing these orders. He gives up his "special powers" and permanently becomes a human to live and die in Professor Martin's snatched body. Then, he fights against the next Vonnadorian alien who is sent to finish the assignment and manages to kill it, one of his own kind. Finally, after a period of being forced away from home —which is what Professor Martin's family now means for the alien—, he reunites with Isobel and Gulliver to lead a happy life. This marks the final words of the novel's last chapter entitled "Home" where the alien-narrator quotes lyrics from Talking Heads's song "This Must be the Place:" which says: "Home – is where I want to be / But I guess I'm already there" (p. 291).

3. CONCLUSION

All in all, Matt Haig's portrayal of a trans-posthuman alien's willing conversion into a human being is a story of resistance against the transhumanist effacement of the neo-Romantic

human, who is very much a product of his struggles, imperfections, subjectivity, and emotions. It is a story about exposing transgressive transhuman fantasies and replacing them with the joy of being human, or as the alien-narrator describes it, "the beautiful melancholy of being human, captured perfectly in the setting of a sun" (p. 282). It is a story about celebrating the human ability and capacity to look at sunsets with eyes "blurred by tears" and see the "beauty" of their "transfixing" colours and be "hypnotised by them" (p. 282) contrary to the experience of a transhuman for whom "a sunset [is] nothing really but the slowing down of light" and for whom the colours do not produce an emotional response but a rational one that only aims to explain but not to enjoy them (p. 282). Unlike the Vonnadorian vision of seamless rationality and perfection, Haig's narrative finds value in the complexities and unpredictabilities of being human. Through its emphasis on emotion, fragility, and relationality, *The Humans* champions a humanist response that holds life's imperfections as essential to beauty and fulfilment.

As such, this study aimed to show the ways in which Haig's *The Humans* responds to transhumanism and its attempts to establish enhancement as the only meaningful and possible destiny for humankind. Haig's portrayal of a character who ultimately rejects technological transcendence for an "imperfect" life encourages readers to reflect on humanity's current trajectory in an era marked by rapid advancements in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and autonomous systems. By humanizing the alien and alienating the transhuman, Haig invites us to question the ethical and existential costs of transhumanist pursuits. Giving his alien-narrator the authority to speak for both human and transhuman worlds, Haig is able to interrogate transhumanist claims to know what humanity needs to have better and more fulfilling lives.

Yet, it is not that the civilisation of Vonnadoria in the novel collapses or turns into a dystopia; hence, it is not a fully-fledged project to crusade against transhumanism. Nor is it an ambition to celebrate human exceptionality and to reestablish an anthropocentric view of the universe ruled by the dictum of *homo mensura*. It merely questions the transhumanist aspirations to become godlike and the confidence and readiness with which they are embraced. As a cautionary narrative, it suggests that in the quest to overcome boundaries, humans must be wary of ideals that might render humanity obsolete. *The Humans* thus serves as a critical reflection on humanity's present and a call to preserve the aspects of humanity that make life meaningful. It can be read as a suggestion to reroute humanity's advancement from a direction that would transgress and breach categories to a direction that returns to "the true value of human life" as the alien-narrator puts it (p. x). As was quoted earlier, it is Haig's attempt to show "the weird and often frightening beauty of being human" (p. 293). According to Haig's portrayal, human happiness and fulfilment relies, as his oxymoron in this statement indicates, on the complex and complementary aspects of the human life where imperfections are complemented by creative struggles, and both those imperfections and the struggles attached to them are complemented by human emotions and experiences of love and solidarity, finally producing the unique joy and beauty of being human.

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