A Confession of Faith: Notes Toward a New Humanism

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“To dwell in the ruins of the University is to try to do what we can, while leaving space for what we cannot envisage to emerge . . . [and] resources liberated by the opening up of disciplinary space, be it under the rubric of the humanities or of Cultural Studies, should be channeled into supporting short-term collaborative projects of both teaching and research (to speak in familiar terms) which would be abandoned after a certain period, whatever their success.”

—Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (176)

“This will no doubt be *like* a profession of faith: the profession of faith of a professor who would act *as if* he were nevertheless asking your permission to be unfaithful or a traitor to his habitual practice.”

—Jacques Derrida,
“The University Without Condition” (202)

In his important book *The University in Ruins*, published two years after his untimely death in 1994, Bill Readings argued that, partly due to a certain state of affairs which he termed both “Americanization” and “globalization,” whereby “the rule of the cash nexus” has replaced “the notion of national identity as a determinant in all aspects of social life,” the Univer-

sity has become a “transnational bureaucratic corporation” and “the centrality of the traditional humanistic disciplines to the life of the University is no longer assured” (3). Further, the University “is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role as producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture,” and as a result, “the grand narrative of the University, centered on the production of a liberal, reasoning subject, is no longer available to us” (3, 9). Ultimately, the University is “a *ruined* institution, one that lost its historical *raison d’être*,” but which nevertheless “opens up a space in which it is possible to think the notion of community otherwise, without recourse to notions of unity, consensus, and communication” (19, 20). This is a space, moreover, where the University “becomes one site among others where the question of being-together is raised, raised with an urgency that proceeds from the absence of the institutional forms (such as the nation-state), which have historically served to mask that question” (20).

Although Readings’ argument in *The University in Ruins* has been subject to carefully considered counter-critique,¹ it remains today, we would argue, a powerful spur to thought and action for those working within the academy who are concerned with the future of humanistic teaching and scholarship. One could say, as we do, that Readings’ emphasis on (and hope for) the University as “one site among others where the question of being-together is raised” is an emphasis (and hope) that is under a certain pressure from work within the humanities, social sciences, and sciences on posthumanism, post-individual personhood, and even, post-*histoire*.² For before we can even begin to raise the question of being-together we must first raise the question of the *being* that could find or wish itself *with others*, and to what end? In her classical defense of a reform in liberal education that would emphasize global citizenship and a deep sensitivity to and embrace of human diversity, *Cultivating Humanity*, Martha Nussbaum argues that becoming an educated citizen means, in addition to “mastering techniques of reason,” also “learning how to be a human being capable of love and imagination” (14). But how can this singular human being to whom Nussbaum refers situate herself in a world where, as the philosopher of religion John Caputo writes, “one has lost one’s faith in *grand récits*,” and “[b]eing, presence, *ouïsa*, the transcendental signified, History, Man—the list goes on—have all become dreams?” (6). For Caputo, “we are in a fix, except that even to say ‘we’ is to get into a still deeper fix. We

are in the fix that cannot say ‘we’,” and yet, “the obligation of me to you and of both of us to others . . . is all around us, on every side, constantly tugging at our sleeves, calling upon us for a response” (6).

For those of us who work within the humanities in the public (or private) university setting, the question of obligation can weigh heavily—as teachers, as scholars speaking to specialized audiences, and as public intellectuals. Although it is possible to slip so far into one’s own highly specialized and arcane area of research that nothing else seems to matter much, and “effective outcomes” or material results can often be, with good reason, beside the point, Jacob Marley’s self-incriminating reproach to Ebenezer Scrooge that “the world should have been my business,” is never too far removed from our thoughts. Indeed, we would agree with John McGowan that,

[t]he term “public intellectual” is redundant. There is—and can be—no such thing as a private intellectual. An intellectual is someone who, by way of words and arguments, aims to influence others. Like Diogenes in search of an honest man, the intellectual is always in search of a public, an audience. (47)

But how can we effectively communicate our work and thought to a “public” that is made up of so many diverse and competing pluralities at a time when, as the political theorist William Connolly writes, the Kantian idea of regulative reason “embraces a profoundly contestable metaphysic during a time in which the global variety of religious/metaphysical perspectives is both visible and palpable” and most contemporary issues are “unsusceptible to resolution by one country, one faith, or one philosophy” (196, 201)? And what would it mean to communicate our ideas, effectively, to even one person when, if certain robotics and artificial intelligence scientists such as Rodney Brooks and Hans Moravec are right, the days of the human person are numbered?³ Or, if philosophers of science such as Nick Bostrom, Director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University, are right and the end of the human person, as currently designed, is devoutly to be wished? As Bostrom himself puts it, “it could be good for most human beings to become posthuman” (24), by which he means, to become “humans” who, through the aid of various technologies,

have increased intellectual and physical capacities, never age, and never die.⁴ And if this were to actually happen, it would present a profound challenge to cultural theorists and public intellectuals such as Terry Eagleton, who believe that it is “our perishing, not our bestowals of meaning, which is necessary” to understanding our “creaturely nature” and the world in which we live (163).

But we don’t have to dwell too long with the dreamer-scientists of brave new futures to be convinced that the days of the human person are numbered, for the elegant work of deconstructing this animal—of lifting the confused brute out of his prettily built narrative skyscrapers of *ratio*, *traditio*, *liberalis humanitas*, *natio*, and so forth, and of laying bare his incoherencies and tyrannies and well-crafted hedges against nothingness—has been well accomplished for a long time now in various of the disciplines of the humanities, the social sciences, and the fine arts. Tracing the dissolution of the liberal humanist subject and the emergence of “virtual bodies” in the sciences of cybernetics, informatics, and artificial life in her book *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles notes that

[t]he liberal humanist subject has . . . been cogently criticized from a number of perspectives. Feminist theorists have pointed out that it has historically been constructed as a white European male, presuming a universality that has worked to suppress and disenfranchise women’s voices; postcolonial theorists have taken issue not only with the universality of the (white male) liberal subject but also with the very idea of a unified, consistent identity, focusing instead on hybridity; and postmodern theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have linked it with capitalism, arguing for the liberatory potential of a dispersed subjectivity distributed among diverse desiring machines they call “bodies without organs.” (4)⁵

And what the posthuman view offers in place of a liberal humanist subject that was already being dismantled long before sciences such as cybernetics were being developed, is “emergence” instead of teleology, “distributed cognition” instead of “autonomous will,” and “system” instead of “self” (Hayles 288, 290). This state of affairs poses a great challenge to those who believe, as the political philosopher George Kateb does, that

“the individual is the moral center of American life,” and further, that “the actuality of the American democracy” depends upon the idea that “the individual is important or prior or precious or sacred” (77). But if this individual, who is so central to democracy, is, as Foucault has famously described, “a product of power,” then what democracy may need now “is to ‘de-individualize’ by means of multiplication and displacement” (1977, xiv).

But it may also be, as certain prominent social theorists argue, that late capitalist modernity has brought about a situation in which the displaced individual is *too much* with us, or with herself: According to Zygmunt Bauman, whereas in the premodern era one was born into her identity, in late modernity (which Bauman terms “liquid”) a fixed and normative social standing is replaced with “compulsive and obligatory self-determination” (2002, xv), and the end result is “a combined experience of *insecurity* (of position, entitlements and livelihood), of *uncertainty* (as to their continuation and future stability) and of *unsafety* (of one’s body, one’s self and their extensions: possessions, neighbourhood, community)” (2000, 161).⁶ For Scott Lash, whereas the individual of the “first” Enlightenment modernity was institutionalized through “property, contract, the bourgeois family and civil society,” the individual of the “second” informational modernity is destabilized through the “retreat of classic institutions: state, class, nuclear family, ethnic group” and through the general indeterminacy of knowledge, such that she begins to spin in perpetual, self-reflexive motion (vii, ix–x).⁷ In their book, *Individualization*, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim define “individualization” as a “non-linear, open-ended, highly ambivalent, ongoing process” in which, supposedly for the first time in human history, “the individual is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction” (xxii).⁸ Moreover, individualization needs to be understood as “the beginning of a *new mode of societalization*, a kind of ‘metamorphosis’ or ‘categorical shift’ in the relation between the individual and society” (Beck 1992, 127). Modernization leads to the individual’s “disembedding,” or “*removal* from historically prescribed social forms and commitments in the sense of traditional contexts of dominance and support (the ‘liberating dimension’),” and also leads to “the *loss of traditional security* with respect to practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms (the ‘disenchantment dimension’)” (Beck 1992, 128). According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, the late modern individual is ultimately “self

insufficient and increasingly tied to others, including at the level of world-wide networks and institutions,” and the so-called “freedom culture,” in which each person supposedly has a right “to a life of his or her own . . . is being destroyed by capitalism” (xxi, xxiii), by what the anthropologist Jonathan Friedman terms a “postmodern-modern-consumptionist” culture in which there is a “narcissistic dependency on the presentation of the self via the commodity construction of identity” (361). This is a culture, in Bauman’s view, in which consumerism is no longer about a “measurable set of articulated needs,” but about “a much more volatile and ephemeral, evasive and capricious, and essentially non-referential” desire, or *wish*, to shop, to buy, and freedom is “translated above all as the plenitude of consumer choice and as the ability to treat any life decision as a consumer choice” (2000, 74, 89). The human being, finally, is “a choice among possibilities, a *homo optinis*” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 5).

There are some sociologists, however, such as Niklas Luhmann, for whom this conception of capitalism giving rise to an impersonal mass society in which the individual is always and precariously *too much on her own* (while also not being in full possession of herself) is too narrowly defined. For Luhmann, the very impersonality that grounds capitalist modernity also opens the way “for more intensive personal relationships,” partly because the very processes of individualization that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim outline, in which the world becomes overwhelmingly complex and impenetrable and dangerous, simultaneously brings about a situation in which there is a “need for a world that is still understandable, intimate and close,” and for which world “a common medium of communication . . . which employs the semantic fields of friendship and love” is necessary (12, 16, 17). Moreover, according to political theorist Jane Bennett, modern life, despite its narratives of a disenchanted and meaningless world, contains multiple sites, or portals, through which we can cultivate “affective fascination.” Interspecies encounters, Epicurean materialism, eco-spiritualism, Deleuze and Guattari’s “body without organs” (or, self-rehybridization), mass entertainments and commodities, and virtual realities (literary, scientific, *and* technological), for Bennett, provide opportunities for wonder and enchantment, without which “we might not have the energy and inspiration . . . to respond generously to humans and nonhumans that challenge our settled identities” (174).

But how does love, or wonder—no matter how many intimate and

enchanted worlds they might create—ultimately fare against impersonal power? In his book *Homo Sacer: Bare Life and Sovereign Power*, Giorgio Agamben has decisively shown that, long before modernity, the individual has always been in a precarious position as regards her “right to life,” especially when the full rights of citizenship do not attain to persons living within or on the margins of established states, and who then can be marked as *not* fully “human”: these are the exiles, the economically disenfranchised, the displaced persons, *sans papiers*, the refugees, asylum seekers, illegal immigrants, *maquileros* zone workers, and “enemy combatants” held in secret prisons who live beside us today, but who in the past, were the *friedlos* (“[person] without peace” in ancient Germanic law), the *wargus* (“werewolf” in medieval Frankish law codes), and the *utlah* or *ælðeodigne* (“outlaw” and “alien person” in Anglo-Saxon law codes), and who were available to be killed as if they were animals. In contrast to the classical world, where “bare life” (*zōē*) was “excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense,” remaining “confined—as merely reproductive life—to the sphere of the *oikos*, ‘home’,” events such as the Holocaust or Roe v. Wade have shown us that “the politicization of bare life as such . . . constitutes the decisive event” of modernity (Agamben 2, 4). Or, as Foucault puts it, while for ages “man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence,” modern man “is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being in question” (1976, 188). And yet, to come back around to science, we now have to take into account the myriad ways in which biotechnology and various neurosciences have called even what we might term “bare life” into question—current debates over stem cell research foreground this fact, as do popular books written by eminent scientists in which the human body and mind are described as “a colony of genes,” a “survival machine” (Dawkins), “a system of organs of computation” (Pinker), and an “autopoietic system” (Maturana and Varela).

The idea, espoused by the biologist Francesco Varela, that “the ‘self’ is a story consciousness tells itself to block out the fear and panic that would ensue if human beings realized there is no essential self” (Hayles 156), and further, that the mind is not a “unified, homogeneous unity, nor even . . . a collection of entities,” but is rather, “a disunified, heterogeneous, collection of processes” (Varela et al. 100),⁹ accords well with recent work in the humanities in queer theory, which emphasizes, in the words of

medieval studies scholar Jeffrey Cohen, “the contingency of identities that have so far successfully passed as solid, monolithic, timeless” (2003, 38). For Cohen and other humanities scholars, queer theory, especially of certain Foucauldian and Deleuzian-Guttarian bents, helps us to see “the limits of the human as a conceptual category and demarcates a new terrain . . . where identity, sexuality, and desire are no longer constrained by ontology, ‘muscle,’ or lonely residence in a merely human body” (2003, 77). Cohen’s thinking resonates with cultural theorists Judith Halberstam’s and Ira Livingston’s posthumanism, in which the human body itself “is no longer part of ‘the family of man’ but a zoo of posthumanities,” “sexuality is a dispersed relation between bodies and things,” and there is no such thing as singular self, only assembled *some-nesses* of being and becoming (3, 38).¹⁰ Just as in Varela’s theory of “enaction,” in which the cognitive structures of a self-enclosed biological organism, such as a “human,” emerges out of nonlinear, dynamic, and sensory-motor interactions with its environment,¹¹ so for Judith Butler and other queer theorists, the “particular sociality that belongs to bodily life . . . establishes a field of ethical enmeshment with others and a sense of disorientation for the first-person, that is, the perspective of the ego. As bodies, we are always for something more than, and other than, ourselves” (Butler 25).¹² As Jeffrey Cohen and Todd Ramlow explicate Butler, this “disorientation” suggests “a process not collapsible to either side of a self/other binary, a process always in motion, changing (performatively) in multiple contexts. More radically, the pack or multiplicity establishes the very ground of possibility for politics and agency.” But in order for this “pack or multiplicity” to emerge, one of the first divides that has to be dismantled is that between “human” and “non-human,” and we must learn “to live and embrace the destruction and rearticulation of the human in the name of a more capacious, and . . . less violent world, not knowing in advance what precise forms our humanness does and will take” (Butler 35).

Not knowing in advance what precise forms our humanness does and will take. It is precisely to this statement of Butler’s, which is also a deferral of any demand for a specific answer to what, exactly, today or tomorrow, determines the human, that the BABEL Working Group (hereafter referred to as BABEL) addresses itself.¹³ Founded in 2004 as a loosely organized collective of scholars working in medieval literary and historical studies, BABEL is devoted to creating new venues for bringing

together scholars working in the humanities, especially in but not limited to classical and medieval studies, with social scientists and researchers working in the more “hard” sciences, in order to formulate new paradigms for humanistic study at the university level and to develop and advocate for a “new humanism” that would be theoretically rigorous, scientifically sound, technologically adept, and ethically capacious. BABEL represents, further, a collective desire on the part of a certain group of medievalists for a more present-minded medieval studies but also for a more historically-minded contemporary humanities.

Scholars working in literary studies have long been discussing how changes in technology will affect the transmission and production of humanistic knowledge, and have even been leaders in the digitization of manuscripts and archives of texts.¹⁴ They have also more recently begun to develop an impressive and growing body of scholarship on what is being called cognitive literary studies or cognitive linguistics, in which, as Mark Turner writes, the study of English is being “reframed” so that it can be seen “as inseparable from the discovery of mind, participating and even leading the way in that discovery, gaining new analytic instruments for its traditional work and developing new concepts of its role” (1991, n.p.).¹⁵ Moreover, humanists cannot be accused of having neglected, in their scholarly reflection and writing, the newer sciences such as genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, psycho-pharmacology, robotics, bioinformatics, and the like—indeed, these sciences have increasingly become a serious preoccupation for critical theorists, literary scholars, and historians alike.¹⁶ And yet, at the same time, there is a growing body of scientists, led by John Brockman, co-founder of the scientific collective Edge¹⁷ and the editor of the essay collections *The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution* and *New Humanists: Scientists at the Edge*, who argue that it has become necessary for scientists and “other thinkers in the empirical world” to “take the place of the traditional intellectual in rendering visible the deeper meanings of our lives, redefining who and what we are” (Brockman, “The New Humanists”). In Brockman’s view, traditional humanities scholars are so exhaustively insular and hermeneutic that they have apparently lost sight of the “real world” and have abdicated their responsibility to elucidate the important philosophical questions regarding human nature, mind and body, identity, ontology, time, and the like. BABEL was formed partly to counter Brockman’s claim that “traditional

humanities academicians . . . have so marginalized themselves that they are no longer within shouting distance of the action” (“The New Humanists”), but also to assert the relevance of medieval studies to scholars working in more modern humanistic fields for whom, in the words of Glenn Burger and Steven Kruger, “the postmodern has often been too easily proposed as a radical movement beyond a [medieval] history thought somehow to have come to an end” (xiv). It is BABEL’s aim to demonstrate the important relevance of premodern studies to pressing contemporary questions and issues, especially those that circulate around the vexed terms, “human,” “humanity,” “humanism,” and “the humanities.”

In recent years, there has been a growing body of humanistic scholarship on corporality and the so-called crisis of the category “human,” both in modern and premodern studies. And yet, while late antiquity and medieval studies scholars have often taken their cues in this field of research from modern theorists such as Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Thomas Laqueur, Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz, and the like, with the sole exception of what has become a kind of *de rigueur* nod to the work of Peter Brown and Caroline Walker Bynum,¹⁸ modern theorists rarely turn to premodern studies for insights into questions revolving around what the sociologist Bryan S. Turner has termed “sociology of the body” and what many term “the turn to the body.”¹⁹ In fact, in *The Hedgehog Review*, in a special issue devoted to “The Body and Being Human,” Jeffrey Tatum indicates that “[i]nterest in the interplay between body and society has a long history,” by which he means, it begins with thinkers like Marx, Engels, Weber, and Freud (126). Further, in the bibliography appended to Tatum’s essay that highlights the supposedly best and most important scholarly work devoted to the human body since the 1960s, not a single work from classical or medieval studies is included. And yet, in recent years there has been an explosion in late antiquity and medieval studies in work on corporality, “humanness,” and the sociology of the body—so much so that it would be an immense undertaking to list all of the titles here. How, BABEL asks, might “the turn to the body” in medieval studies join “the turn to the posthuman” in more contemporary theoretical studies, as well as in the sciences and social sciences, in order to help current ideas regarding the human body, and human person, benefit from a longer historical perspective? How, further, could we explore, *together*, the “traumas, exclusions, [and] violences enacted centuries ago”

that “might still linger in contemporary identity formations,” and also see, with changed eyes, a past that “could be multiple and valuable enough to contain (and be contained within) alternative presents and futures” (Cohen 2000, 3)?

Much of the contemporary debates over posthumanism have mainly focused on the ways in which new biotechnologies and new findings in the cognitive sciences have complicated how we conceptualize and enact our human identities, ushering in the language of crisis over the supposed destabilization of the category “human,” in its biological, social, and political aspects.²⁰ This same posthuman turn has also, in some science circles, led to a language of giddiness and elation over all the ways in which we—whatever “we” might be—might finally be able to escape or transcend the death-haunted trap of our corporal bodies. Cohen has argued, provocatively, that the Middle Ages were already posthuman, for it was a period fascinated with composite and monstrous bodies, and with the transformations between human and inhuman, corporal and more abstract substances. Further, there is a wide variety of medieval texts which demonstrate that, even in the Middle Ages, human identity was, “despite the best efforts of those who possess it to assert otherwise—unstable, contingent, hybrid, discontinuous” (Cohen 2003, xxiii). With this idea in mind—of both a posthuman Middle Ages and a posthuman modernity, neither of which is entirely free of concepts, identities, and social forms that are both alive and dead at once—BABEL decided to formulate a set of questions to which we would address our collective efforts into an indeterminate future:

- Can we have humanism, or the humanities, or human rights, without the human?
- How does the concept (or, reality) of the posthuman impact the ways we develop our notions of humanism, both past and present?
- How do the various historical traditions of humanism (classical, medieval, and early modern) productively and antagonistically intersect with more modern anti-humanisms?
- In what ways might medieval and more modern studies, with respect to the vigorous debates over the value (or lack thereof) of the liberal humanities, form productive alliances across the Enlightenment divide?

- What is the role of the individual, singular person in relation to concepts of humanism, past and present?
- What is the role of language and literature in relation to being, body, and mind, past and present?
- Is it true, as some have argued, that the individual (and a concomitant emphasis on phenomenological inwardness) is a product of modernity (or, at least, of the post-Enlightenment), or has the self, constructed in philosophy and other arts, always been “deep”?
- How does the interplay between singular corporalities and social “bodies” affect our understanding of what it means to be human, both in the past and in the present?
- What is the role of the Other (or more generally, alterity) in our conceptions of humanism and “being human,” past and present?
- How might recent findings in cognitive science—such as, “The mind is inherently embodied,” “Thought is mainly unconscious,” and “Reason is not dispassionate, but emotionally engaged” (Lakoff and Johnson 3, 4)—affect how we might re-think our university humanities curricula and teaching practices?
- Can we have, as the psychologist Abraham Maslow advocated for in the 1960s, a “humanistic biology” which is not morally neutral or value free, and which seeks to make us “wiser, more virtuous, happier, more fulfilled” (20)?
- If *the* definitive politics of our time (and likely in the foreseeable future as well) is biopolitics, how might premodern studies intervene into this politics, with the hope of securing a place for a radically liberal new humanism or post-humanism within that politics?
- Is humanism a philosophy, or set of ideas, or a historically-situated socio-critical practice, that has lost its *raison d’être*, such that it is time for a new humanism or no humanism at all?

It is this last question, especially, with which BABEL could be said to be obsessed. There is no doubt that humanism—especially of the variety in which, in Iain Chambers’ words, “the human subject is considered sovereign, language [is] the transparent medium of its agency, and truth [is] the representation of its rationalism” (2–3)—has a terrible reputation and has been responsible for some of the worst atrocities perpetrated in history (torture, cruel medical experimentation, campaigns of disenfranchisement

of persons' homes and possessions, apartheid, slavery, ethnic cleansing, gulags, genocide, etc.). Furthermore, we are aware that any attempt to recuperate humanism *now* may always come too late if, as Foucault supposes in the conclusion to *The Order of Things*, "man" has already been "erased," like "a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (387). Nevertheless, it is BABEL's hope that a new humanism could be formulated that would be perpetually subject to rigorously critical self-examinations as well as it would be vigilantly cared for and safeguarded.²¹ There are good reasons, we believe, for hanging on to the idea of the *possibility* of a recuperated and recuperative humanism in an age in which humans and other living beings are among the world's chief industrial waste products, "squatopolises" are becoming mega-cities, and secret economies such as human and human organ trafficking are thriving.²² While we are fully aware that, historically, humanism and the human have a long and troubling history that implicates them in violent exclusions, as well as in deprivations and disenfranchisements of all sorts, we would also aver that humanism (of different philosophical varieties) has also been responsible for heroic acts of psychic and material sustenance, rescue and redemption, mutually-productive alliance and overcoming, and personal freedom. It is not a question of having some sort of scale that allows us to measure whether humanism has led to more atrocities than it has to social and other boons, but rather, of acknowledging that it has done both, in separate times and places, and simultaneously, such that in a particular street in a particular city at a particular point in time, in a room on the second story of a house, one so-called humanist was engaging in an act of cruelty underwritten and approved of in his philosophy, while in another room on the first floor of that same house, and from reading the same books, another so-called humanist was engaging in a radical, even illegal, act of kindness. And our job, as scholars working within inherited humanistic traditions we are reluctant to discard entirely, is to understand as well as we can this complex and complicated history of humanism and to decide: what is salvageable and what must be put away forever?

In this sense, BABEL desires what Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley have termed a critical or "baggy" humanism that "takes the human to be an open-ended and mutable process" (2). And like Halliwell and Mousley, we wish to develop a humanism that is "both a pluralistic and a self-critical tradition that folds in and over itself, provoking a series of questions and

problems rather than necessarily providing consolation or edification for individuals when faced with intractable economic, political, and social pressures" (16). This is a humanism that also acknowledges, with Chambers, that "Being in the world does not add up, it never arrives at the complete picture, the conclusive verdict. There is always something more that exceeds the frame we desire to impose" (2). Alongside this valuable insight, BABEL wishes, if even temporarily, to hang on to the terms "human," "humanity," and "humanism," not because they are meaningful ideas or states of affairs *in and of themselves* (because their value is somehow, *ipso facto*, obvious), or because they adequately "frame" who we are and what we do, but because we believe we need these terms as always-open sites for continual explorations and forays into *what we think we may be* at any given moment. Biologically and historically speaking, and regardless of our abilities to enter into processes of "becoming posthuman" or "becoming inhuman" with and alongside others (human, animal, machine, or otherwise), ultimately, at some level, *we are thus and not thus*. Regardless of the names we give ourselves, or even of our capacities for transformation beyond ourselves, there must be a way to account for our difference that does not do violence to others and that could even enhance the possibilities for a greater share of happiness and well-being for a greater share of the living forms that together inhabit this world. *We are thus and not thus*. What is our given-ness, however minimal, the place from which we begin to go forth?²³ What are the possibilities, partially determined by our given-ness, available to us? What, further, *given* our given-ness (for our *being at all* is a sort of gift), are our responsibilities as intellectuals, but also as humanists: How do we *re-give*? It is to these questions, and with all the powers of pre- and postmodern critical thought and scientific understanding we can muster from whatever corners, that BABEL would like to see a new humanism, by whatever name, address itself.

As regards our more narrow purview—literature, history, philosophy, narrative and critical theory, and the arts—BABEL is especially concerned with developing a new, "baggy," and critical humanism that would explore: 1) the significance (historical, socio-cultural, psychic, etc.) of individual freedom, expression, and affectivity; 2) the impact of technology and new sciences on what it means to be an individual or self; 3) the importance of art and literature (and therefore, obviously, language) to defining and enacting the human; 4) the importance of

history in defining and re-memembering the human; 5) the transformational possibilities inherent in the human, and how those transformational possibilities help us to see how the human can be redefined as something open and not closed (and how such has always been the case); and 6) the question of what might be called a human collectivity or human “join”: what is the value, or peril, of “being human” or “being inhuman” together?

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In addition to its edited volume of essays, *Cultural Studies of the Modern Middle Ages*, this special issue of the *Journal of Narrative Theory* represents one of BABEL’s first forays into a collaborative and “baggy” humanistic scholarship between medieval studies, more contemporary humanistic studies, and the sciences, with the objective of interrogating together the open terms, “human,” “humanity,” “humanism,” and “the humanities.” Gathered together in this issue are the thought and writing of four scholars of early and late medieval English literature (Eileen A. Joy, Christine M. Neufeld, Robin Norris, and Myra J. Seaman), one historian of early medieval Europe (Michael E. Moore), one Victorianist (Maria K. Bachman), one critical theorist (Doryjane Birrer), and one social scientist (Michael Uebel). The essays gathered here represent a collective attempt, as Michael Moore writes in his essay, at “paying careful attention to the lives of others, living and dead, real and fictional,” in order to begin to enact a more affective and affecting humanities studies. Such studies demand, following Derrida, that we be willing to be unfaithful to our habitual disciplinary practices, such that a medievalist might reflect upon Margery Kempe, science fiction, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* (Seaman), Homer and the Iraq War (Norris), or Alcuin of York and the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz (Moore), and a modernist might be found ruminating upon Edward Said’s democratic criticism and medieval werewolves (Birrer), a Victorianist upon mental cognitive functioning and narrative attachment disorder (Bachman), and a psychotherapist upon *Gestalt* and marine ecology (Uebel).

The issue begins with Michael Moore’s essay, “An Historian’s Notes for a Miloszan Humanism,” a proposal for a humanism in the spirit of the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz that, like its predecessors in the medieval and

early modern periods, seeks a renewal of the self through its contact with the past, but which does not follow the well-trodden paths of “humanizing the world” that has been marred by the boot prints of too many armies. Instead Moore invites us to consider a model of humanism that would seek to “humanize the self” through the “ethical imperative of recollection.” Moore models his revised and self-critical humanism—a contemplative mode that seeks to “discover new critical and artistic paths” in its study of the past—on the intellectual labors of Carolingian scholars, the musings of late medieval mystics, and, above all, the poetry of Milosz and George Mackay Brown, artists of a disenchanted era who, even in the face of political devastation and the dissolution of the idea of a universal “humanity,” labor to honor the claims the dead, *our* dead, still have on us. In her essay, “A New Species of Humanities: The Marvelous Progeny of Humanism and Postmodern Theory,” Doryjane Birrer also addresses the criticisms leveled at humanism, exploring in particular the scholarly debate between traditional humanists and postmodern theorists, where each faction casts its antagonist as a monstrous Other in a pitched battle to determine the fate of the humanities. Wary of such binary thinking, and inspired by medieval and more modern narratives of “humane” werewolves, Birrer interrogates the idea of the “familiar at the heart of the [monstrous] unfamiliar.” Drawing upon the popular television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as well as the fourteenth-century Middle English romance *William of Palerne*, Birrer outlines what is at stake in the humanist-antihumanist debate along with some of its fallacies, and proposes that those of us working in the humanities embrace the idea of an uncanny hybrid, a marvelous union of “humanist self-assertion” and “postmodernist self-critique” that would thrive on the tension between certain unassimilable principles and aims.

Myra Seaman also looks to medieval werewolves, as well as science fiction, in order to investigate conceptions of the posthuman in her essay “Becoming More (than) Human: Affective Posthumanisms, Past and Present.” Seaman examines the often paradoxical role of embodiment in futuristic visions such as the most recent *Battlestar Galactica* television series, the film *Dark City*, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go*, all of which imagine the material and psychic effects of posthuman societies irrevocably changed by certain advances in techno-science. Even as the perceived imperfections of the human body have supposedly been over-

come, these narratives consistently align human “essence” with bodily vulnerabilities and a concomitant affectivity that engenders empathy, self-understanding, love, and art. For Seaman, this privileging of emotional affect resonates with particular aspects of medieval thought and experience, where certain notions of the human-Other hybrid, “as a more developed, more advanced, or more powerful version of the existing self,” especially in Christian theology, were intimately connected to empathy and suffering. As Seaman illustrates, whether it is constituted as medieval werewolf, ecstatic religious experience, or futuristic human-machine hybrid, the posthuman contests the valorization of Reason and Science in order to retain a humanity that defines itself primarily through its emotive and other fragilities. The medieval past and contemporary present also illuminate one another in Robin Norris’s consideration of mourning rituals in her essay, “Mourning Rights: *Beowulf*, the *Iliad*, and the Iraq War.” Examining the nature of grief and memorialization in traditional heroic epics, Norris reminds us of “our duty to remember,” a duty that, in contemporary times, extends beyond the individual aristocratic warrior hero to include the soldiers Shakespeare’s Falstaff refers to as “cannonfodder” as well as the civilians caught in the crossfire of national and international disputes. As she contemplates the public debates in the U.S. surrounding Casey Sheehan’s burial and his mother Cindy Sheehan’s protest of the Iraq War through a campaign of extended mourning, as well as the responses to the funeral disruptions orchestrated by Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church, Norris exposes the claims we make upon our dead, even as she reminds us of the many human casualties that still escape our attention. Moreover, Norris highlights the ways in which the transmission of sorrow through the technology of poetry “is an experience unique to human beings, to being human,” and how reading such poetry “subjects *Homo sapiens* to a contagious mourning that allows us to weep for individuals we’ve never met, and who may have never even existed.”

Drawing upon cognitive science, narrative theory, moral philosophy, and evolutionary psychology in her essay “Who Cares? Novel Reading, Narrative Attachment Disorder, and the Case of *The Old Curiosity Shop*,” Maria Bachman examines how empathetic concern for others is cognitively and emotionally mediated in fiction in such a manner that may actually *limit* our ability to care for others. Exploring moments of “narrative inattention” in a novel known in its time for “its ennobling appeal to emo-

tion,” Bachman focuses in particular on the cognitive biases of Dickens’s child protagonist “little Nell,” and points our attention to what Nell (and by implication, audiences) choose *not* to observe, their lack of curiosity for the characters or minor episodes that inhabit the “narrative borderlands” of fictional worlds and that make up the larger, often faceless “stream of life.” Considering this dilemma within the context of neuroscience, Bachman determines that a certain “neuroplasticity” and Darwinian hierarchy of care has moral implications affecting not just how we read novels, but also how we “perceive, categorize, and act in the real world.” Michael Uebel’s essay, “B(eing)-Students,” although addressed to certain currents in humanist psychology, education, and marine ecology and not to novels or novel reading, shares with Bachman’s essay a concern that “learning about the world is only as important or as necessary as learning about how we prevent ourselves from doing so.” Bringing together the humanistic, Gestalt, and “Being”-psychology of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and others from the 1950s and 1960s, the philosophical thought of Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogics, and the ecological work of the Depression era biologist Edward Ricketts, Uebel formulates an approach to learning that would be “mindfully present”—“receptive, nonjudgmental, and reflective”—and that would emphasize “affective empowerment.” Uebel argues for attentiveness to “the spaces in between,” the “boundary event that amounts to a process of relational intentionality,” where the classroom is a “shared field of knowledge,” and the acts of teaching and learning a “dance.” The B-student, who is a “Being-student,” is one who “recognizes that the outer, visible manifestations of invisible fields of force are only responsible for the unique pattern and form of individual instances of social and community life. Of much greater significance are the usually unacknowledged and always intangible webs of relationships and connections that subtly lead the social organism to the particular place we find it at any given time.” Ultimately, in Uebel’s view, humanistic education “has a stake in fostering the power to directly perceive one’s own character in relation to or dialogue with others; that is, regarding problems not as being ‘out there’ but rather as being claimable as one’s own responsibility.” Uebel’s essay has important implications, we believe, not only for educational philosophy, but also for narratological understanding, for how we read and perceive the “the intangible webs of relationships and

connections” within the texts we study, but also within the historical worlds in which those texts are encountered *at any given time*.

As these essays hopefully demonstrate, the BABEL Working Group, although a scholarly collective with a special emphasis on premodern studies, is also interested in tracing, in collaboration with scholars working in more modern humanities disciplines, and with scientists and social scientists, what William Connolly has described as “dissonant conjunctions”: “In every moment, the pressures of the past enter into dissonant conjunction with uncertain possibilities of the future. The fugitive present is both constituted by this dissonant conjunction between past and present and rendered uncertain in its direction by it” (145). BABEL is interested, in other words, with *time*, with all of the *any given times*, and by extension, with all the ways in which various temporalities—dissonant, irregular, and otherwise—intersect and help to shape our life and thought. Which means BABEL, even with its interests in thing supposedly “dead” and “past,” is intensely focused on the present moment of both the university and also the larger world, to which we believe humanism and its attendant humanities have always directed themselves. In other words, for BABEL, following the thinking of Edward Said, the canonical texts of humanism and the humanities (which include Uebel’s humanistic psychology),

far from being a rigid tablet of fixed rules and monuments bullying us from the past—like Wagner’s Beckmesser marking the youthful Walther’s mistakes in *Die Meistersinger*—will always remain open to changing combinations of sense and signification; every reading and interpretation of a canonical work reanimates it in the present, furnishes an occasion for rereading, allows the modern and the new to be situated together in a broad historical field whose usefulness is that it shows us history as an agonistic process still being made, rather than finished and settled once and for all. (25)

Moreover, with Martha Nussbaum, we agree that there must be such a thing as “poetic justice,” if we want to believe that it is possible, through a particular sort of imaginative immersion in the study of literary, historical,

scientific, and other arts, to answer in the affirmative Whitman's questions, in *Song of Myself*, "Do you hold . . . love for those hardening to maturity? for the lastborn? little and big? and for the errant?" (qtd. in Nussbaum 1995, 120).

In his important essay, "The University Without Condition," Derrida argued that, if a "concept of man seems both indispensable and always problematic . . . it can be discussed or reelaborated, as such and without conditions, without presuppositions, only within the space of the *new Humanities*" (203). This "new Humanities" would be one, in Derrida's view, which would "treat the history of man, the idea, the figure, and the notion" only "on the basis of a nonfinite series of *oppositions* by which man is determined, in particular the traditional opposition of the life form called 'human' and of the life form called 'animal'" (231). And although the university "without conditions" (a university that would be completely free and independent of obligations to anything but the truth) does not, strictly speaking, exist, "it should remain an ultimate place of critical resistance—and more than critical—to all the powers of dogmatic and unjust appropriation" (204). This unconditional university, further, would constitute "the principal right to say everything, even if it be under the heading of fiction and the experimentation of knowledge, and the right to say it publicly, to publish it" (205). Finally, the humanities would have a privileged place in this unconditional university, because the very principle of unconditionality

has an originary and privileged place of *presentation*, of manifestation, of safekeeping in the Humanities. It has there its space of discussion and reelaboration as well. All this passes as much by way of literature and languages (that is, the sciences called the sciences of man and culture) as by way of the nondiscursive arts, by way of law and philosophy, by way of critique, questioning, and, beyond critical philosophy and questioning, by way of deconstruction—where it is a matter of nothing less than rethinking the concept of man, the figure of humanity in general, and singularly the one presupposed by what we have called, in the university, for the last few centuries, the Humanities. (207)

Derrida's thinking here accords well with Readings' reflections, invoked at the beginning of this essay, that the University (capitalized to indicate its historical status as an ideal and idealized institution), however "ruined," must strive toward building a "community that is not made up of subjects but *singularities*": this community would not be "organic in that its members do not share an immanent identity to be revealed," and it would not be "directed toward the production of a universal subject of history, to the cultural realization of an essential human nature" (185). Rather, this would be a community "of dissensus that presupposes nothing in common," and that "would seek to make its heteronomy, its differences, more complex" (190). In this scenario, the posthistorical university would be "where thought takes place beside thought, where thinking is a shared process without identity or unity"—this is ultimately "a dissensual process; it belongs to dialogism rather than to dialogue," and instead of a new interdisciplinary space that would "reunify" the increasingly fragmented disciplines, there would be a "shifting disciplinary structure that holds open the question of whether and how thoughts fit together" (192).

This, finally, is where the BABEL Working Group locates itself: within the rubble of Readings' University in ruins which is also Derrida's university without condition as *event to come*—this is the queer space, or heterotopia, that theorist Michael O'Rourke, following the thought of Derrida, has so lovingly delineated as "roguishly relational in its opening to disciplinary neighbors in 'an infinite series of possible encounters' . . . open to the other, the future . . . the coming or love of the other" (36). Because BABEL cannot say for certain what the outcomes of its work might be, or might never be, and because it cannot know in advance whether the human will have pride of place in its philosophy or will sit to the side of something else, its chief commitment is the cultivation of a more mindful "being-together" with others who work alongside us in the ruined towers and Babels of the past. BABEL roams and stalks these ruins as a multiplicity, a pack, looking for other roaming packs and multiplicities with which to cohabit. We seek to build desiring-machines for which no "join" that can be thought is withheld from our embrace, and in which embrace a more capacious and generous humanism might arrive, and if only briefly, come to rest and dwell in the queer space that is *among us*.

Notes

The formulation of BABEL's philosophies and projects is a continually ongoing and perpetually self-transforming process that relies upon the generous provocations to thought of its various members and also its non-members. We wish to thank here especially the commentators at the medieval studies group weblog *In The Middle* (<http://ijcohen.blogspot.com>), who have tirelessly helped BABEL to fashion and refashion its mission: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Mary Kate Hurley, Nicola Masciandoro, N50 (a.k.a. "srj"), Michael O'Rourke, Dan Remein, Karl Steel, and Michael Uebel. We wish to also thank the members of the BABEL Working Group who helped to organize and preside over the multiple conference sessions that led to this issue: Betsy McCormick and Myra Seaman.

1. See, for example, LaCapra, "The University in Ruins," where he argues that the contemporary American academy is not as much a "transnational bureaucratic corporation" as it "is based on a systematic, schizoid division between a market model and a model of corporate solidarity and collegial responsibility" (32). Further, LaCapra argues that Readings insistence on the fact that "the older ideals of culture, *Bildung*, the liberal subject-citizen, and the nation-state are no longer relevant" in the contemporary academy belies the fact, in LaCapra's view, that these things were always phantasms or idealizations, "made to cover a much more complex and changing constellation of forces that varied with nation, region, and group" (38, 39). LaCapra also wonders, "with respect to the present," if "culture, ideology, and the nation-state are as evacuated or obsolete as Readings believes" (39). See also Royle, "Yes, Yes, the University in Ruins," and LaCapra, "Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes . . . Well, Maybe: Response to Nicholas Royle."
2. On the idea of post-*histoire*, and the debates over whether or not history has, indeed, come to an end, see Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, and Niethammer, *Post-Histoire*.
3. See Moravec, *Mind Children and Robot*, and Steels and Brooks, eds., *The Artificial Life Route to Artificial Intelligence*. On the idea that artificial systems of intelligence will one day supersede human beings, see also Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*.
4. On the idea of future races of super-humans, see also Stock, *Metaman* and *Redesigning Humans*, and Silver, *Remaking Eden*.
5. According to Bennett, Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs" (or, BwO) can be described as a "human body working itself out of its organ-ization as an organic whole. BwO is never an achieved state. It is a multispecied and ongoing project of be-

coming in which new links are forged among ‘things, plants, animals, tools, people, power, and fragments of all of these.’ BwO is the weird science of self-rehybridization.” Further, “BwO is a social creature,” and “the extent of its networks of implication go beyond the social to include alliances with nonhumans, the inorganic, the imaginary, and other ‘planes of consistency.’ According to Deleuze and Guattari, BwO is a creature that hovers between human and nonhuman being, between who-ness and it-ness” (24).

6. On the processes of “detraditionalization” that leave the late modern individual in a position of precarious insecurity, see also Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, “Living in a Post-Traditional Society,” and *Modernity and Self-Identity*.
7. The reason the “second” modern individual is “reflexive,” as opposed to “reflective” (with “reflective” denoting the individual’s supposed ability to subsume an object under a subject of knowledge), according to Lash, is because he or she never has time to reflect, only to quickly and reflexively make decisions and choices—decisions, moreover, that must be continuously re-thought and re-chosen because knowledge is always, in late modernity, uncertain, “probabilistic, at best; more likely ‘possibilistic’” (x).
8. The “individualization argument,” as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim phrase it, is integral to Beck’s more well-known “risk argument,” in which he has argued that a totalizing, globalizing economy, in conjunction with new, accelerated technologies, demystified norms of knowledge, perpetual self-reflexivity, and non-traditional social configurations, has brought about unprecedented social hazards and irreversible threats to the life of the planet. See Beck, *Risk Society*.
9. For a current overview of work in cognitive science that affirms Varela’s ideas of “en-action” and the “embodied mind,” see Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*.
10. On the idea of the self as a collection of “some-nesses” of being, figured by Deleuze and Guattari as “n minus 1,” see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 6.
11. For work in feminist philosophy that draws upon Darwin, as well as upon Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Merleau-Ponty, in order to explicate how the human self is largely a production of inhuman, impersonal or pre-personal, and subhuman “forces of becoming,” such as biology and temporality, see Grosz, *The Nick of Time* and *Time Travels*.
12. Although a biologist and a cognitive scientist, Varela is also a Buddhist whose work is inflected by certain ethical propensities, such that he is as concerned with deconstruct-

ing as well as recuperating certain aspects of what is understood by the “liberal humanist subject.” On this point see Hayles 156–57.

13. For more information on the history, mission statements, and ongoing projects of the BABEL Working Group, see <http://www.siu.edu/babel/>.
14. See, especially, McGann, *Radiant Textuality* and Landow, *Hypertext 3.0*.
15. See also Herman, ed., *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts*, Richardson and Spolski, *The Work of Fiction*, Turner, *The Literary Mind*, Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, and the special issue of *Poetics Today*, “Literature and the Cognitive Revolution.”
16. On this point, see the overview of “Technological Humanisms” in chapter 8 of Halliwell and Mousley, *Critical Humanisms* 159–79.
17. The list of members of Edge (<http://www.edge.org/>) and Brockman’s “Third Culture” collective reads like a “who’s who” of the leading scientists, philosophers of science, and social scientists of our times: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, David Deutsch, Jared Diamond, Freeman Dyson, Brian Greene, Marvin Minsky, Steven Pinker, Lee Smolin, Sherry Turkle, J. Craig Venter, and E.O. Wilson, among many others.
18. See especially Brown, *The Body and Society*, and Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* and *The Resurrection of the Body*.
19. See Turner, *The Body and Society*, Csordas, ed., *Embodiment and Experience*, Featherstone et al., eds., *The Body*, and Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*.
20. For the most measured cautionary view, see Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*. See also the special issue of *The Hedgehog Review*, “Technology and the Human Person.”
21. For a brief overview of the traditional humanist and more modern anti-humanist positions, see Davies, *Humanism* and Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism*.
22. On these points see Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, David, *A Planet of Slums*, Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities*, Scheper-Hughes, “The Global Trade in Human Organs,” and the reports collected at Human Rights Watch on human trafficking, <http://www.hrw.org/women/trafficking.html>.
23. In their book *Critical Humanisms*, Halliwell and Mousley argue that we must be critical of “various premature closures whereby one version of humanism is taken to be representative of the whole . . . and whereby the human itself is taken to be a given,

rather than contestable and criticisable.” However, they also aver that “too much openness may lead to a complete loss of the human,” and therefore, “if the human does not operate as some kind of given, the words like alienation, depersonalization and degradation lose their evaluative and ethical force.” Further, “the notion of the endless plasticity and pliability of the human . . . is tantamount to suggesting that human beings can live under any conditions whatsoever” (10). We would concur. On the idea of a new “critical humanism,” see also Todorov, *On Human Diversity* and *The Imperfect Garden*.

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