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’etre,” 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 Ebeneezer 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? 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. 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

[the 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)

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). 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). 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). 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 “dismembering,” 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
in sufficient and increasingly tied to others, including at the level of worldwide 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 *æl∂eodigne* (“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” (*zœe*) 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), 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 Deleuzan-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. 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.). 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. And yet, at the same time, there is a growing body of scientists, led by John Brockman, co-founder of the scientific collective Edge 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 rigeur nod to the work of Peter Brown and Caroline Walker Bynum, 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.”

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. 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’etre, 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? 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-membering 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 “cannon fodder” 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://jjcohen.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 “detradiationalization” 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 “enaction” and the “embodied mind,” see Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*.


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.siue.edu/babel.

14. See, especially, McGann, Radiant Textuality and Landow, Hypertext 3.0.


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.


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.


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.

**Works Cited**


A Confession of Faith: Notes Toward a New Humanism


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An Historian’s Notes for a Miloszan Humanism

Michael Edward Moore

“O my love, where are they, where are they going”
—Czeslaw Milosz, “Encounter” (1978, 3)

The awkward term “humanism” has served as the title of too many movements and ideals, and seems drained of significance, like a wrinkled old balloon. To speak of revising and retrieving the term for a new form of humanism, as will be done here, is to invite many possible misconceptions. In a strict, traditional meaning, in the context of Renaissance humanism and its later reflections, humanism refers to an attempt to affirm the dignity of the human spirit, and to renew modern culture by a return to antiquity. These goals were to be achieved through the study of human things (res humana), by means of scholarship and literature, history and the arts. In regard to the possibilities for humanism today, and drawing on the poetry and essays of Czeslaw Milosz, I wish to suggest the following theses:

• A new humanism, appropriate to our world, and to a hoped-for world civilization, can be intellectually and spiritually grounded in ‘old humanism’ and its medieval and Renaissance background.
• A new humanism would be a valuable position, even a source of joy, because of its purposes: to provide resources for personal liberation and the confrontation of certain poisonous contemporary cultural and political realities with ancient alternatives.

A Miloszan humanism would prove beneficial because it would neither project an ideal humanity nor offer an historicist project for transforming humans into a new humanity.

Such a humanism, further, would rely on real contact with the living and the dead, which is an important dimension of Milosz’s poetry, neither wishing humans away nor idealizing them, and implying the importance of broad study of the human tradition.

The goal of humanism would then be, not to humanize the world, but to craft an engaged, highly cultured and scholarly standpoint, and thus to humanize the scholar, or rather, to humanize the self.

This is to suggest a view of literature and scholarship as the deliberate unfolding of dimensions, and the search for possible connections to various traditions of the human past as part of our own efforts to achieve personal liberation, “penetrating this forest of ruins,” in the phrase of religious historian Gershom Scholem, who sought to rescue the Jewish past from oblivion, and thereby to find a foothold in a terrible present time—for Scholem, the 1920s. In a letter to Meta Jahr in 1920, Scholem said that he had experienced a merger of his historical scholarship and kabbalism, claiming, perhaps ironically, that he had become a makabel or kabbalistic practitioner (209). Any humanist approach that would be valid today must greatly expand the range of literary traditions and antiquities under study, something that has recently been called for in an admirable essay by Milan Kundera, “Die Weltliteratur.”

The humanist is a specialist in rare fragments, which are collected out of the distant past, arranged and explained like beautiful seashells. Scholarship, when it is true to the past, causes these fragments to glow as if with renewed life, thus allowing them to become part of our own spiritual world. Since the Middle Ages, the pursuit of a spiritual form of life often involved the juxtaposition and interchange of reading, reflection, prayer and meditation. A growing awareness, cultivated in the school of Chartres, that “truth is the daughter of time,” as Bernard of Chartres exclaimed, led to the incorporation of history and study of the human tradition as part of a developing humanist approach to scholarship. Bernard’s motto, *Veritas filia Temporis*, we may note in passing, was a learned reference to the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius (see Chenu 162; Ginzburg 27).

Any broad discussion of humanism must offer some reflections on the
revival of interest in the Greek and Latin classics, a hallmark of humanist culture, during the Middle Ages and also during the later flourishing of humanism in the Renaissance. Various modern attempts to revive a moralising, normative humanism, such as the New Humanism of Irving Babbitt, have failed. After all, even the classics-loving poet T.S. Eliot could not bear the relentless moralism of the New Humanism (see Torrance 175). The tendency of humanism to adopt a normative tone of remote grandeur has provoked a contemporary reaction against any possible continuation of humanism. But humanism can find better paths for itself by returning to literature, notably the works of Czeslaw Milosz. This would be the frame of a kind of humanism, much less certain of itself, and less given to propounding dicta for others to follow, in the style of earlier humanisms (see White 426–27).

I wish to trace a path to a Miloszan humanism starting from an examination of the early appearance of humanism in the Middle Ages, on to the Renaissance and the modern era, in order to consider the possibility of returning to the idea of scholarship as a way of life, or as a contemplative path. The literary historian and professor of poetry at the Sorbonne, Émile Faguet, once noted the ancient connection between books and contemplation, complaining that in the modern world “life is not literary because it is not contemplative” (qtd. in Antonio Perez-Rioja 5). Faguet wrote in 1913, in what now seems like an antediluvian age, before the First World War. The old medieval ideal of the contemplative life, given canonical expression by the sixth-century author Julian Pomerius, still resonated easily with Faguet. First of all, however, it is necessary to confront the impasse faced by humanism since the late twentieth century.

**Humanism and the Flowers of Evil**

In 2000, the critic George Steiner was invited to look back over the twentieth century, in an interview with the French weekly *L’Express*. He pointed to the barbarism of a century marked by death camps, torture, deportation and famine, extending from 1914 to the terror-regime of Pol Pot and the Rwandan genocide. The twentieth century proved to be the defeat of civilized culture, according to Steiner: “Education: philosophical, literary and musical culture, did not impede the horror. Buchenwald was situated a few kilometers from the garden of Goethe” (qtd. in Simonnet).
Jorge Semprun, who was himself interned in Buchenwald, later remarked in his memoir *Literature or Life* on the geographic and moral irony of this conjuncture. Semprun observed the terrible coincidence that brought Léon Blum, socialist, Dreyfusard, and author of the *Nouvelle conversations de Goethe avec Eckermann*, as a prisoner to the Ettersberg forest—“the quirk of fate that led Blum as a prisoner of the Gestapo to the very place where the conversations between Goethe and Eckermann occurred” (96; see also Blum).

The original *Conversations with Eckermann* are a monument of the maximal period of humanistic education and of a classicizing, humanistic love affair with the ancient world. The *Antike* was an ideal artistic realm that could be permanently reawakened and emulated. As Goethe remarked, commenting on the nature of Greek tragedy, its subject matter was “humanity in its whole extent” and so we should always study great writers, but “above all things, the old Greeks, and always the Greeks” (149–50). For Goethe, as for Schiller, the world of classical Greece was a beautiful world. As viewed from Weimar, all things in ancient Greece sparkled and were more worthy (see Bruford 86). For Semprun, in contrast, the experience of radical evil cast doubt, not only on such enthusiastic ideals, but on the continued possibility of literature, and his memoirs record his endeavor to fight his way back out of these ruins.

George Steiner strongly implies that the proximity of Buchenwald to the Oak of Goethe was far more than a coincidence: this happenstance illustrated the fact that the ideal of humanity developed during the Enlightenment, and expressed in the political ideals of the Eighteenth century, had completely failed to humanize the world. The inhabitants of Weimar who became Nazis and built the camps were in some way the heirs of Goethe and Schiller. Moreover, according to Steiner, the so-called humanizing effect of the liberal arts also seemed doubtful in the extreme. The humanities have become an isolating preserve in which the real world is kept at bay. While reading *King Lear* or the *Fleurs du Mal*, Steiner remarks, “I do not hear the cry in the street” [“je n’entends pas le cri dans la rue”] (qtd. in Simonnet). His best student, Steiner declared, was the one who completely rejected his teaching and went off to become a doctor, serving the poor in China. The anecdote reflects the skepticism of an old professor whose life had been wagered almost entirely on literature, and who arrived at the end of a terrible century marked by a sense of futility about the isolated con-
temptation of the scholar in his or her study. But Steiner’s criticism of literature, in the course of his own profoundly literary life, also brings to mind a saying of the anti-modernist and aphorist Nicolás Gómez Dávila, that “there is no humanism that does not carry with it a critique of humanism” (197). No mature and fully developed humanism can fail to incorporate the edge of critique, or fail to examine its own false paths. We can reflect that Steiner’s criticism is humanistic in its deepest orientation, as well as in its sense of rebellion and disquiet.

The question raised here is whether it is possible to discover a path for humanistic scholarship adequate to contemporary existence, yet still capable of offering the ressourcement provided long ago by medieval and classical humanism. As Robert Torrance has noted, we live in an era that has been defined as “not only post-structuralist and post-modernist, but post-humanist and indeed even post-human” (168). The possible collapse of literature, experienced with a sense of horror by Semprun, has become for many scholars an occasion for playful adventures in the ruins of old systems.

Humanism has been criticized along the lines of Steiner’s views at least since the end of the Second World War, in a Europe which had seen, in Steiner’s words, “the triumph of the inhuman at the heart of the century” (xi–xii). Traditional ideals could be maintained only with tremendous effort, or abandoned as no longer pertinent to the human condition. As early as 1951, for example, the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss argued that Europeans of the Enlightenment, who often spoke of humanity, did little more than project their own values and aspirations as a universal ideal of civilization: “the concept of an all inclusive humanity, which makes no distinction between races or cultures, appeared very late in the history of mankind and did not spread very widely across the globe” (Finkielkraut 2000, 5–6; see also Finkielkraut 1995, 55). The ideal of humanity therefore, despite its universal claims, was destined to remain a narrow European concept with limited impact on world consciousness. This has been one of the most devastating arguments raised against humanist traditions. So now, in the cultural conditions of “postmodern pluralism” as Gianni Vattimo argues, the very concept of humanity and study of the humanities seems suspect, unphilosophical, or undemocratic (3–5). In the 1960s, the ideal of humanism (along with the concept of the Rights of Man) was dismissed as a feature of petti-fogging bourgeois ideology (Judt 565). Thus
we arrive at Foucault’s derisive comment that “Man is an invention of recent date” (387). If the constraints and disguises inherited from classical thought could finally be discarded, the early Foucault believed, then the unwelcome notion of humanity would at last be “erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (387; see also Nehemas 170–73).

The most negative and vitriolic statement of this anti-ideal is that of Lacoue-Labarthe: “Nazism is a humanism in so far as it rests upon a determination of humanitas which is, in its view, more powerful” (95). Torrance is right to remark that nothing could be more anti-humanistic than this phrase. Lacoue-Labarthe’s strange saying was not intended to decry Nazi ideology so much as to sweep away the last crumbs of humanism from the respectable tables of the intellectual world, thereby to create more room for Heidegger and Heideggerian anti-humanism. Lacoue-Labarthe thus evidently shared Foucault’s revulsion at “the moralizing swamp of humanistic sermons” to be heard in post-war Europe, and Foucault’s anti-humanistic reaction to those sermons (see Finkielkraut 2000, 28). It is equally interesting to note, in this connection, the contemporary turn from humanism in the neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth, in favor of what Barth termed the “humanism of God,” meaning “God’s friendliness to man as the source and norm of all human rights and human dignity” (125). In contrast, however, Foucault’s perspective neither provided for a heightened awareness of justice, nor awakened energy for a greater engagement with the world, nor offered a defense of human dignity. There was an element of dandyism in Foucault’s reaction against what appeared to be a thoroughly exhausted humanism. Postwar efforts to pick up the threads of humanism often seem feeble in retrospect.

In his desire to find a path back from the horrors of the twentieth century, the Prussian historian Friedrich Meinecke famously suggested that “Goethe Communities” should be created in postwar Germany, so as to encourage the reestablishment of the spiritual life of Germans by “turning again to the altars of our fathers” in respect to religion. Meinecke hoped to bring about for his fellow Germans “an intensified development of our inner existence,” by looking back to the period long before Hitler’s Germany, when the generation of Goethe “strove for and to a large degree realized the ideal of a personal and wholly individual culture. This culture was thought of as having at the same time a universal human meaning and content” (113, 115). Meinecke’s humanist project is so well known in part
because it appears so woefully inadequate to the situation of post-war Ger-
dany, and because it suggests a feeble and unrealistic reply to the mon-
strousness of the war and the radical evil unleashed by the Nazis. More-
over, German high culture and Bildung were not above reproach, since
these values were held up as a fetish even by the Nazis, whose officer
 corps continued to wipe tears from their eyes at productions of Beethoven
in the wartime concerts of the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler.

So the question remains: is it still possible to explore “the opalescent
notion humanitas” in the phrase of Ernst Kantorowicz, by means of deep
study in the human tradition (1957, 451)? As the Carolingian scholar Al-
cuin explained, when we turn our attention to mankind, we discover a
complete amalgam of dignity and abjection. If we wish to understand why
humanity was created, the repulsive side of man should be put to one side,
and “we should consider the nobility of the interior man” (col. 1101). Al-
cuin, the illustrious scholar of Charlemagne’s court, therefore imagined a
transcendental, universal human identity based on the concept of the in-
visible soul and its likeness to God. The medieval and Christian roots of
the figure of humanity are evident throughout the periods of scholarly and
theological transit from late antique to later Renaissance and Enlighten-
ment images of humanity. However, in the modern era, even long before
WWII, such ideas began to lose their lustre. Under the impact of anthro-
pology, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the wide examination
of human types and human cultures had begun to dethrone those venerable
medieval assumptions. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, for example, after comparative
research on the mentality of archaic societies (which he ordinarily termed
“primitive”), concluded that there was no “identity of human nature”
(75–79). According to Lévy-Bruhl, “since we have rejected the philoso-
phies of history which provide a unifying principle in the form of theolog-
ical or at least teleological ideas, the conception of humanity as a whole
escapes us” (qtd. in Cazeneuve 24). Thus we really must ask whether it is
still possible, or meaningful, to propose a humanism in the absence of a
clearly defined essence of humanity.

Recently the late Paul Ricoeur pointed to the dangers that arise for
legal and political theory from the dethronement of “humanity” and the
disenchantment of “Man.” With the defeat of those universal ideals, and
the intellectual and political reactions against the legal and metaphysical
inheritance of the Enlightenment, it has become difficult to theorize, let
alone defend, the existence or the importance of human rights (9). The de-
feat of the opalescent notion humanitas threatens to leave us without a
legal subject of rights, and perhaps without a subject of history or litera-
ture as well. The problem is acute for historians, who want to validate
their continued moral and intellectual preoccupation with the dead, their
constant efforts to handle their belongings and books, and their efforts to
preserve and understand their ephemeral voices.

The Meaning of the World

The hesitation and doubt of George Steiner are completely supported
by the events of the twentieth century, and yet a quite different voice was
raised in the wake of World War II in the poetry and essays of Czeslaw
Milosz, who endured the siege of Warsaw, and went on to live a life de-
voted to literature. It may be possible to outline a Miloszan humanism,
which resonates with earlier doctrines and hopes.

The fifteenth-century humanist Nicholas of Cusa once spoke of his
mystical search for God as a “spiritual hunt” (see Matusevich 249). As
Pierre Magnard explains in his essay “La chasse de la sagesse,” the mo-
ments of discovery that Nicholas experienced would fill him with a sense
of gratitude and jubilation. Milosz conveyed in many of his poems a simi-
lar sensibility, of a hunt for the ethereal and receding essence of the
world—the effort to close one’s fingers around the past even as it dis-
solves, and to capture its meaning. Recalling days of exploration with a
fellow poet and friend long ago in Poland, Milosz intoned in his poem
“Winter”: “Great was that chase with the hounds for the unattainable
meaning of the world” (1986, 36). In the spiritual hunt for the meaning of
the world we never experience a feeling of arrival or satisfaction.

While Milosz often examines the meaning of nature, and a multitude
of theological questions, the object of this “chase with the hounds” for
Milosz is almost always the elusive, faded being of the human past. Here,
in “Hans Post,” he finds it captured in an old Dutch painting:

Hans Post, his Brazilian landscapes painted around 1650.
. . . what moves me is a contrast between the earth and a
group of people dead long ago . . . Brazilian Indians who
disappeared both as particular beings and as a tribe. Soli-
An Historian's Notes for a Miloszan Humanism

One is reminded of the quite similar insight of Marguerite Yourcenar, observing and reflecting on the engravings of Piranesi: “let us consider for a moment, magnifying glass in hand, the miniscule humanity which gesticulates on the ruins or in the streets of Rome” (101). Human existence of the ancient past seems very frail and distant, lying beyond the screen of the artist’s canvas and skill, and yet we wish very much to see into those antiquities, and to examine these human traces, which after all are real.

Solidarity. The dead have a claim on us with their long-forgotten passions and foibles, and their unwonted delicate breath continues to stir the hair on our necks. This regard even extends to the realities invoked by art and literature. In the poem “Undressing Justine,” Milosz discovers and makes love to a character from an old Polish romance novel. The being of this delectable character is also human, and therefore worthy of being cherished: “Though you never existed, let us light candles / Here, in our study, or in our church” (1995, 46). This aspect of Milosz’s thinking seems to reflect a sense of being haunted by men and women of the past. In his last great work, Second Space, the poet’s own soul seems to grow ever more familiar and intimate with the dead, and with the characters of literature, as he approaches the end of his life and in a setting of quavering transparency finds himself becoming capable of crossing and re-crossing the borders between memory and actuality, life and death.

Milosz is one of the most important writers on the subject of time and memory since St. Augustine, ranking beside Proust, and his work therefore has the effect on an historian (and on literary historians and critics) like the smell of woodsmoke on an autumn day, a sense of homecoming: a presentiment of dignified beauty in the study of the past, and a spirit of appropriate regard, of decorum and benevolence, toward the dead. As Milosz reacted against the effects of Communist rule in Poland, especially on his artist and intellectual friends, he also rejected all versions of historicism. This was the lesson he took away from the demoralizing and dehumanizing effect of Marxist historical dogma on his friends and fellow writers in Poland, whose attraction to Communism seemed to sap their fellow-feeling and to deprive them of normal contentment and good will. He
described the destructive historicist mentality in this way, in his long essay *The Captive Mind*, written shortly after the war, about spiritual and intellectual conditions in Soviet-dominated Poland:

Let a new man arise, one who, instead of submitting to the world, will transform it. Let him create a historical formation, instead of yielding to its bondage. Only thus can he redeem the absurdity of his physiological existence. Man must be made to understand this, by force and by suffering. Why shouldn’t he suffer? (10).

The result of Communist doctrine on his friends and acquaintances was a mental attitude that would willingly destroy mankind, if need be, in order to save it.

He was dismissive of those who would use history to vindicate programs that smash those who stand in the way: “He who invokes history is always secure. / The dead will not rise to witness against him. / You can accuse them of any deeds you like. / Their reply will always be silence” (“Child of Europe,” 1980, 64). The dead require us to speak for them. This charge is laid on the poet, and the historian, both of whom are subject to visitations by the dead. Milosz found himself continually haunted by the upwelling of people out of the past: a woman walking with a red umbrella in a sunlit field or an old priest blowing out candles in a dark church. It could happen as he gathered apricots: “I reach for a fruit and suddenly feel the presence / And put aside the basket and say: ‘It’s a pity / That you died and cannot see these apricots’” (“Gathering Apricots,” 1991, 54).

This is to notice something subtle in the fabric of life, which points back into the depths, and offers itself as a tenuous path toward the meaning of the world. A journal entry from the notebooks of Elias Canetti seems to express a similar idea: “His belief: that nothing is ever lost, particularly nothing that has taken place between people” (39). Such a presentiment is the Spur, the vestige, always looked for by the historian. The presence is sometimes felt even by historians at their reading desks in archives or libraries. The painful sense of the tangible reality of the dead, the being of someone who has been hurt and forgotten, is something that often attracted Milosz’s attention and worry. “He asks forgiveness / from
the spirits of the absent ones / who twitter far below / at the tables of buried cafés” (“Many-Tiered Man,” 2004, 34).

Milosz’s essays and poetry are redolent of the oldest reveries of humanism, but give rise to startling new combinations. In his work we find a deep type of humanism united with a stark Manichaean view of a disenchanted nature. Wartime experiences sharpened his awareness of mankind’s capacity for bestiality, and thus the optimistic view of universal human nature is totally missing from his work. With painful lucidity, Milosz suggests that by proclaiming human equality we only protect ourselves from observing the inequality that surrounds and supports us, albeit unjustly, so that “a true and deep experience of the truth of human equality is a rare and difficult thing” (1975, 163). Unable to affirm the crystalline structures of Thomistic theology, he was a master of cautious exploration and self-doubt, rather than a master of assertion. Instead of the traditional pieties of humanism, Milosz unfolds tactful, delicate portraits of individuality, especially of the long-ago lives of those who have died.

If there is a Miloszan humanism, it differs from traditional humanism in another regard: despite the classical balance and restraint of his work, Milosz found classicism in the arts to be tiresome, and in any case inaccessible and even forbidden to an artist living in the midst of the modern world and the twentieth, or worst, century, which we would be right to call the pessima aetas. In this sense, Milosz found himself far from the sunny Greece of the Weimar classical period. The task of poetry has changed, and must now serve as a witness to the age, and thus poetry can probably no longer find its way back to the sublimity of a superbly heightened language or the stability of perfected forms. The Sublime may no longer be available to the artist, or so he once suggested to me, although it can be argued that a new and more lean and subtle Sublime takes shape in his poetry (Moore 1985, 95). Because of his skepticism about classical forms, and his disdain for merely antiquarian interest in the past, Milosz said that he had a “quarrel with classicism” (1983, 61–75). Poetry, and the artist, are like the mysterious “road-side dog” who inscrutably watches humanity over the centuries as the human comedy goes by along the dusty roads (Milosz 1998, 3).

In the writings of Milosz we find new connections between words, books, and contemplation, all of which are brought forward in the service of memory. Memory: the capture of human reality in recollection and lan-
guage, and especially remembrance of the dead, was for Milosz one of the
guiding purposes of poetry. Memory, and the ethical imperative of recol-
lection, would have to be at the center of any revision of humanism, and
any historical scholarship based on it.

What Does Humanism Say?

To quote the medieval historian and monk Jean Leclercq, “nothing is
more constant in history than the ephemeral” (2004, 829). The ephemeral
nature of past reality, and of human traces is a burden that historical re-
search must try to carry, even if it is clumsy, and less capable than poetry
of handling those past lives with sufficient delicacy and gravity, or of cap-
turing their reality in fine nets of language. The awareness of the
ephemeral, and its continued presence, is a part of the fierce moral stance
of Milosz’s poetry. The Orkney poet George Mackay Brown arrived at a
similar understanding in his own poetical works, and thus a brief excursus
is called for here:

I have a deep-rooted belief that what has once existed can
never die: not even the frailest things, spindrift or clover-
scent or glitter of star on a wet stone. All is gathered into
the web of creation, that is apparently established and yet
perhaps only a dream in the eternal mind; and yet, too, we
work at the making of it with every word and thought and
action of our lives. (qtd. in Fergusson 289)

This expresses the essence of the Miloszan humanism that I am attempting
to sketch in this essay: the endeavor to capture the world of coming-to-be
and passing-away, and above all, to hold and defend the traces of the frag-
ile “human reed” of Pascal’s famous fragment, and thereby to cooperate in
the establishment, and the continuous creation of the world. As Pascal put
it: “A human being is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a think-
ing reed” (72). For Milosz, the poet can play a role that has a particular
spiritual importance, a defense of the weak reed, that is based in a sense of
“identification with people of the past . . . a feeling of fraternity that helps
us penetrate the curtain of time” (1983, 113).

One can also point to the medieval and classical roots of Mackay
Brown’s poetry, as expressed in the Homeric thirst and disorientation of
The Sea and the Tower, or his exploration of an Anglo-Saxon twilight, with references to the Venerable Bede, as in the poem “Bird in the Lighted Hall”: “Bright door, black door / Beak-and-wing hurtling through, / This is life” (1996, 117). Mackay Brown’s poems are craggy with the landscapes of northern islands, and Viking-obsessed. He believed that his poetry emerged out of a “pool of silence” which he asserted was the ultimate source of all poetry: a poem was “a cold pure round of silence; a fold; a chalice where, having tasted, a man may understand and rejoice” (qtd. in Murray 4). Indeed, the inscription on Mackay Brown’s tombstone reads: “Carve the runes / Then be content with silence” (Fergusson 288).

We can admire the fluid Ciceronian writing, with its sheer vitality and amplitude, of the Renaissance authors, but it seems false and impossible now. Thus we turn instead to the stark galactic Hellenism of St. John Perse in the Anabasis, in which we can perceive the antiquity of our world, with its Alexandrian adventures in the Middle East: “Omnipotent in our great military governments, with our scented girls clad in a breath of silk webs” (53). Or similarly, we might study the ancient themes of historical guilt and reconciliation in Seamus Heaney’s Sophoclean play, The Cure at Troy. Here we can point to a different rhetoric—classical works without the brilliance of Weimar classicism, but instead seemingly fragmented or dessicated by salt and sun. A language that arises out of an atmospheric silence, as described by Mackay Brown, or which has been kept hidden in a desk drawer during times of political oppression, as in the cases of Zbigniew Herbert or Anna Akhmatova, seems more adequate to the mysterious and degraded nature of our own political times. There is a silence of subterfuge and resistance that still draws on the resources of classical themes. In the face of historical and political devastation, poetry has reflected a newly intense, even desperate classicism, as in Akhmatova’s poem “The Death of Sophocles”: “That night an eagle swooped down from the skies onto Sophocles’ house. / And the garden suddenly rocked with a cry of cicadas” (139).

The approach to the ancient past has a vibrant and urgent timbre in the hands of certain recent historians as well. The elegant, lucid treatises of Pierre Hadot, notably the essays collected in Philosophy as a Way of Life, reflect an historical approach to classical antiquity that is grounded in a precise knowledge of context and of relevant traditions, which make it possible to reactualize the past on the way toward fuller self-understanding.
As he once explained in an interview, only the cautious interpretation of texts, avoiding all anachronism, can allow one to be confronted at last with the original lustre of historical reality. Out of the effort at objectivity arises “a supplement, a surplus, which is to find there our spiritual nourishment” (2001, 115). The method, based in traditional erudition carried out to a formidable degree, allows us direct access to the thoughts and writings of the ancient philosophers, which appear once more in their living originality, by no means paraded by as a troop of “great thinkers” whose eminent words we should accept as authorities, but offered to his readers in the nature of a living challenge, opening new perspectives which can lead us out of the impasse of our own times. This theme appears in Hadot’s commentary and translation of the Manual of Epictetus. Having broached the difficulty and even the unattractiveness of the treatise, Hadot concludes:

And wide vistas open before me: a glimpse that our vision of things is totally mythical, that we are terrified by scarecrows that we ourselves have fabricated, that our passions are too often the fruit of illusions, that we refuse to see reality as it is; but above all I can sense that I am able to change that, to become aware of prejudices, conventions, habits, mirages, of which I am the victim. It is in this power to change my judgement of things that my liberty resides. (159–60)

Medieval Humanity and Humanism

For early medieval thinkers, the concept of humanitas often inspired little more than outrage at human disobedience and depravity. Consider the coiled gloom of Agobard, writing in the Carolingian ninth century: “All lovers of the world, all seekers after trifles or earthly things are enemies of God [inimici sunt Dei]” (440). Agobard followed St. Augustine in regarding humanity as a mere “lump of perdition” [massa perditionis]. While some will enter the Heavenly Jerusalem, most will remain in that city of evil men, the Civitas Diaboli. Medieval scholars developed the theme of the nature of man in the dozens of books that were written during the Middle Ages using the same title, De anima, really a genre of writing, which gradually added complexity and benevolence to the picture of hu-
Manity made in the image of God—man the inventor and builder, man and woman the possessors of reason. Rabanus Maurus exclaimed that with the gift of reason mankind “girded the cities with walls, invented defensive weapons, wrapped himself in a diverse array of garments, established roads in trackless wastes, passed over the seas with the diligence of art” (col. 1111). Reflecting the cultural ambitions of the Carolingian Renaissance, the great teacher Rabanus was full of appreciation for the special destiny of humankind, and was happy about it. A sense of active change and community also emerged as part of the basic flow of history.

Out of the rocky soil of ninth- and tenth-century monasteries a later flowering of studies would emerge, along with a new spirituality that was nourished by the new scholarship: an “integration of [the monastic ideal] to the most lofty and subtle mystical doctrines . . . with their ancient basis” (Leclercq 1964, 86). In the monastery of Cluny, Carolingian authors were studied alongside patristic authors and ancient historians. Books were highly prized, and richly decorated; bejewelled copies were made. According to Leclercq, the monks loved these books: “their content, their beauty, their utility. They helped the monks to pray” (1964, 122). The connection between books and contemplation also lies behind Leclercq’s significant claim that “if humanism is the study of the classics for the reader’s personal good, to enable him to enrich his personality, [then the medieval monks] are in the fullest sense, humanists” (1974, 170). At Cluny the old horror of human depravity was to some extent defrosted, as we can see in the creation of the benevolent and almost democratic Feast of All Souls’ Day. This liturgical celebration was a step along the path of recognizing and defending humanity, not as a massa perditionis, but as worthy of love, requiring and meriting defense—the help of monastic prayer in this case (see Moore, “Demons”). The highpoint of medieval humanism came in the culture of teaching and learning of northern France, especially in the cathedral school of Chartres of the twelfth century. Here the Seven Liberal Arts were studied in a humane atmosphere that allowed John of Salisbury to accept Virgil as a source of ancient wisdom (see Haskins 100–6). We find Ivo of Chartres, for example, ready to use the term “humanity” in a good sense (see Morris 317).

Throughout these developments, the reading of Aulus Gellius can be taken as a typical symptom of humanism. The Attic Nights is a work delectably interesting, unclassifiable, and somehow pointless. The best rea-
son to read it is the intense pursuit of literary achievement and joy, as well as for anecdotal contact with philosophers and other great persons of the classical past. Among the dense forest of citations from classical authors to be found in John of Salisbury, Aulus Gellius occurs frequently, alongside Juvenal, Seneca, Cicero, and the historians Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Livy (1909, 1:29).

Even while opposing the dangerous and crude political forces of his day, John of Salisbury found it vital to refresh his thinking in the literature of antiquity and to observe, as if through a magnifying glass, the tiny, long-vanished figure of Cato the Elder, as he appears in the *Attic Nights*. John’s political framework and aspirations seem, from our vantage point, very distant from those of the ancient figures he admired. Although he was present at the assassination of Thomas à Beckett, John’s hatred of tyranny had been shaped earlier, reflecting his faith in the sacred value of Roman law and its place at the center of Christian European politics. His resistance to tyranny was connected to a “deep sense of the spiritual significance of the international unity of Christian civilization under the universal Roman law and the universal spiritual jurisdiction of St. Peter’s successor” (Webb 69). John concurred with the perspective of canonists and the Glossators of Bologna, whose views the modern historian must distinguish from the mental world of the Roman jurists of old, and the original context of Roman law. From its medieval beginnings, humanism was not merely a curiosity about the ancient past, but an earnest search among its monuments and ruins for new resources that might prove valuable in the present day. Knowledge of the ancient past allowed John of Salisbury to find a spiritual homeland, and thus to turn his face toward a different, seemingly better horizon of hope during a dark age of politics and an era of brazen assassination.

While continuing to draw on Carolingian authors in his *Policraticus*, John turned to classical literature as a source of political knowledge and to support his pursuit of a philosophical life: according to the long, self-referential poem *Entheticus Maior*, many works of the ancient pagans are valuable and can help us along our path, while Christian authors surely complete them and lead to our true happiness (see Nederman 41–43). The connection between scholarship and the search for happiness was an essential theme of John’s humanism, and a characteristic note in the *Policraticus*. We already catch glimpses of the St. Jerome of the Renaissance,
working away at his writing desk, in his eternal, wood-paneled study, as the patron saint of humanists (see Liebeschütz 25, 67).

Humanism is a pilgrimage across the human and natural world; in a search for human dignity and, let it be said, for personal liberation in the study of the human tradition: literature, philosophy and history, especially the literature and history of antiquity. Humanism desires to keep hold of the delicate frail things of the world and of humanity. Thus it is not surprising that since the Middle Ages, the study of the humanities has so often had to engage in a confrontation with crude social forces. Study of humanity and the natural world was undertaken to achieve an ideal of humanity in one’s own life, which is often forgotten by scholars. It would be reductive to view humanism as nothing more than a strategic academic stance, although this was certainly one feature of the Renaissance world of letters, as of our own.

In the fifteenth century, humanists such as Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples combined the cultural harvest of the ancient world (Aristotle, Hesiod) with the mysticism of Jan Van Ruusbroec and the somber piety of the *Devotio moderna*. Seemingly in contradiction to Christian views of fallen human nature, Renaissance humanism always sought to develop within Christian norms, and in that regard was a direct extension of medieval humanism. Here we find a gesture that involves the study of human life, and the effort to achieve an ideal of humanity in one’s own life, inspiring new efforts in the arts and literature (see Renaudet 145–48; Hyma 262–64). Yet all of this was linked to a new spirituality. Lefèvre d’Etaples became a student of the Dutch mystics while serving as librarian of the Sorbonne, and combined this spiritual quest with classical studies: thus his editions of Aristotle and of the works of Nicholas of Cusa depict the two wings of his interests and research. A certain gothic stiffness of soul did not prevent him from finding a spiritual home in Florentine humanism with its emphasis on neoplatonism.

Wessel Gansfort, a central figure of the *Devotio moderna*, could likewise draw on his knowledge of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, and even the curious work of Aulus Gellius. Such humanistic combinations served in the nourishment of individuals, as a new, worldly version of the traditional monastic contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*), or even the *vita solitaria* of the hermits (see Kantorowicz 1965). Renaissance humanism emerged directly out of earlier medieval humanism, and the
monastic quest for a philosophical life of direct confrontation with the truths to be discovered in patristic and classical studies (see Leclercq 2004, 838). This development went hand in hand with the rediscovery of the concept of *humanitas*, incorporating the insights of authors from antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The paths open to modern humanism are supported by the scholarship and poetry of earlier times. In his introduction to the *Laments* of the Renaissance poet Jan Kochanowski, Stanislaw Baranczak describes that poet’s complex relationship to Christian orthodoxy and classical tradition in a form that could equally well apply to the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz:

> Just as in *Laments*, expressions of religious doubt that border on blasphemy can be pronounced because their speaker still thinks, argues, levels his accusations, or asks his questions in the symbolic language of religion, so the breaking of the classical rules gives the poetry positively new force and import because the rules are still recognized as an abiding presence. (xix–xx.)

The importance of the humanist tradition has never lain in repetition, but in the discovery of new critical and artistic paths. As a result, the classical has scarcely been exhausted as a source for “ennobling thought” or for personal cultivation. For Kochanowski, the classical tradition offered a form of language and a frame of meaning for his grief after the death of his beloved daughter. As Milosz would argue, the classical forms of language can no longer serve. Nevertheless ancient themes and ancient literature are a means of ensuring our contact with the dead. As an aphorism of Gómez Dávila has it: “Literature is not merely a game of fantasy. The literary dimension is no superficial aspect of the world, it is the very depth of things” (31). And Milosz speaks of the realm of literature as a refuge that is strange and complex, somewhat embarrassing, and yet a valuable source of spiritual interiority for those who suffer in the midst of history. Literature was, for Milosz, a “tanglewood”

> which had provided refuge for generations and was more real than any visible world. . . . How to explain to foreigners that he lived through years of war and terror only in ap-
Across the entire period examined here, from the Middle Ages to the modern era, lines of connection between literature and historical study of the human tradition were constantly renewed and rediscovered as sources for contemplation and self-knowledge. The poetic frame has proven fruitful and valid, shaping memory, bringing it to lucidity and awareness, and thus enabling self-knowledge, as in B.H. Fairchild’s recent poem “Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest”: “In his fifth year the son, deep in the backseat / of his father’s Ford and the mysterious / of time, holds time in memory with words / night, this night” (7). Historical study can find similar paths, and offer profound opportunities for reverie and the search for wisdom. The practice of historical reflection can become a spiritual discipline that sets the historian and the poet apart from the lies and complicity of the community, to oppose the “power of forgetting,” as Milosz describes it in the little parable “A Historian’s Worries” (1998, 151). This power of forgetting is part of the corrosive effect of time. Human lies and forgetfulness cooperate with corrosive time, and can tear down human reality and grind personhood into dust, or even, such was Milosz’s constant fear, dissolve it into the chaos of non-being.

Humanism, as the study of classical and medieval literature and history, as it developed from the medieval period, through the Renaissance and into the Weimar Classical era, was also a spiritual and philosophical quest for self-awareness, and an attempt to grasp at the meaning of the world. A love of books quite naturally became a constant element of the humanist attitude. Twelfth-century humanism, in the expression of Ernst Robert Curtius, is a type of study which, “like every true humanism, delights simultaneously in the world and in the book” (315; see also Torrance 173). In the following lines of Mackay Brown’s poem “December Day, Hoy Sound,” the book appears as repose and culmination:

Look, the crucible is cold,
Look, the manuscript
    Sifts pages across the great oak table,
The sheaves are in the barn.
A book is heavy with jewels and icons. (2001, 107)
Similarly, a Miloszan humanism would mean to study and contemplate reality, and thereby to aspire to liberation from the bindings of history, and the lies of the community. Facing the world of passing-away and coming-to-be, we can aspire to knowledge of ourselves and our fellows, even across the boundaries of death:

We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the road.
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive,
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they going
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder. (“Encounter,” 1978, 3)

By paying careful attention to the lives of others, living and dead, real and fictional, we may yet be saved, and learn how to humanize ourselves.

Notes

This essay is dedicated to Czeslaw Milosz, and, it is hoped, has been conveyed to him by obscure means. Research was completed with the help of a fellowship at the Herzog-August Library in Wolfenbuettel, Germany. Thanks to Madeleine Levine and Eileen Joy who read earlier versions of this essay, and to Christine M. Neufeld and Ian Aebel, who offered so much valuable help.

1. All translations of modern works and original sources are my own, unless otherwise noted in the bibliographic reference.

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Abbreviations:
HAB = Herzog August Bibliothek: Wolfenbüttel, Germany
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An Historian's Notes for a Miloszan Humanism


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A New Species of Humanities:  
The Marvelous Progeny of Humanism and Postmodern Theory  

Doryjane Birrer  

My research and teaching fields are firmly rooted in the present, but as I work through certain vexed conceptions of the human/humane, reciprocal challenges posed by humanism and postmodern theory, and how all of this might relate to the future of the humanities, I want to play around with a premodern-postmodern connection that’s a bit out of my field. I’m going to start with medieval monsters—specifically, medieval werewolves. The fourteenth-century Middle English romance William of Palerne tells the story of an heir to the Spanish throne, Alphonse, who has been bewitched into werewolf form by his stepmother. He is a friendly werewolf. A helpful werewolf. A benevolent werewolf. In short, a humane werewolf, in both senses of the term humane outlined by Raymond Williams in Keywords: he is possessed—as those instinct-driven werewolves of horror films like The Wolf Man are not—of “human nature,” of “human reason.” And he is also humane in the later sixteenth-century sense of being “kind, gentle, courteous, [and] sympathetic” (148). He rescues the eponymous young hero, is sorrowful when William leaves him, and later becomes a sort of lupine protector to him. William, in fact, characterizes the werewolf midway through the narrative as being of “man’s kind” (ll. 2505–6)
and, near the end of the tale, he declares that the wolf has more human nature than William himself and the king of Spain combined (l. 4123).

This conception of the werewolf as more human than beast—in fact more human than two humans, and nobility at that—is an intriguing one, given that the classical conception of the human as defined against beasts or monsters was only just beginning its shift toward the late medieval/early Renaissance conception of humanity as conceptualized in relation to divinity (Williams 149).\(^1\) Perhaps that’s what makes this romance an unsettling tale: when a werewolf can be a compassionate and humane friend, and a parent can be a malevolent and inhumane enemy, how can “humanity” be identified or persuasively characterized within bodies that would be recognizably “human”? This question brings me to my second, postmodern example, from season four (1999–2000) of Joss Whedon’s cult television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This season marks the entrance into Buffy’s world of the Initiative: the blinkered, diabolical U.S. paramilitary agency ostensibly dedicated to capturing, de-fanging, and destroying all monsters, but more covertly involved in using them for torturous—in fact, I’ll say inhumane—experiments.\(^2\) So when Buffy’s season four lover Riley Finn, secretly a high-ranking Initiative commander and all around government yes-man, captures a werewolf whom his Initiative cohorts then proceed, as ordered, to torture, it should be business as usual. And yet this particular werewolf is Buffy’s friend Oz and Riley’s own student from his day job as a university teaching assistant. In fact, for a good three seasons, Oz has been one of the most humane characters on the show. I mean *humane* again as in *benevolent* and *compassionate* (vide Williams), but to continue highlighting the human/beast slippage, I’ll turn to the initial and interestingly abstract *OED* definition of *humane* as “[c]haracterized by such behaviour or disposition towards others as befits a man” (emphasis mine). In any case, Riley’s military “us versus them” mentality is severely challenged, as he is disturbed to discover how increasingly blurred are the boundaries between us and them, human and monster—and ultimately, given the methods and objectives of the Initiative, human and humane.

Granted, *William of Palerne* still relies on pretty clear distinctions between the “good” characters and the “bad” despite its humane werewolf,\(^3\) and Buffy continually pits her white-hatted “Scooby gang” against each season’s unequivocal “Big Bads” despite the show’s student werewolf, a scant handful of more or less harmless (if not altogether benign) demons,
and a couple of vampires with souls. Although I can’t be so exhaustively circumspect as to try to address every potential loophole in my argument, surely I would at least note such obvious caveats. Much as the human capacity for higher reasoning is said to separate humans from beasts, a capacity for even higher higher reasoning is often assumed to separate academics from the lay public. A gift of savvy scholarly self-reflexivity? A higher-than-general-populace degree of awareness of the personal biases, underlying assumptions, and context-situatedness of our arguments? Call it what you will, I think academics tend to assume that we’ve got it. Much as we employ such “higher higher reasoning” to question and qualify the grounds of our own arguments, we also contest the “us/them,” “self/Other” binaries that have supported, for example, the capacious of imperialism and colonialism in which humanist thinking has unfortunately at times been complicit—binaries such as civilized/barbaric, industrious/lazy, rational/superstitious, self-restrained/perverse, Christian/heathen, and perhaps, at heart, human/inhuman. And yet we fall so easily into such binaries when talking about humanism itself. This has especially been the case over the past few decades when humanism has been pitted against its most prominent Other: postmodern theory, or more broadly, anti-humanism. As with person versus werewolf, human versus monster, it’s temptingly convenient to define humanism against postmodern theory, or the reverse.

Wherein lies the lure of such binary thinking within the academy? Certainly we’ve been asked implicitly throughout our academic careers to conceive of our work, in part, in terms of disciplines and sub-disciplines, fields and specialties, categories and taxonomies. Such conceptions, however, are often tacitly if not openly acknowledged to be heuristic rather than absolute, and while they may become matters of debate, they don’t of necessity impel academics to fall into an Initiative-style us/them mentality. Perhaps in the humanism versus postmodernism context, the situation is different in that while field-related groupings generally allow for fuzzier borders and more subtle gradations, the divide between humanism and postmodernism has seemed irrevocable and un-crossable given the history of how these terms have been deployed. The rise of postmodern theory in the academy was accompanied by thinking perceived to be unequivocally anti-humanistic, in part due to theoretical content antithetical to the long history of humanist thought, and in part due to explicit challenges posed.
by theory to the legacies of so-called humanist behavior. And because academics on both sides of the humanist-postmodernist divide have presumably represented irreconcilably different approaches to considerations of human(e) behavior, the trajectory of the human, and the future of the humanities, considerable personal investment has been involved in defining one’s own allegiances within such contestable terrain. Consider, for example, Tony Davies’ somewhat hyperbolic (but I’d say fairly accurate) characterization of the humanist seen from a pro-humanist perspective as “the philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity, standing alone and often outnumbered against the battalions of ignorance, tyranny and superstition,” and of the humanist seen from an anti-humanist perspective as an “ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture, the marginalization and oppression of the multitude of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak, even . . . for the nightmare of fascism and the atrocity of total war” (5; see also Soper 80).

*Homo homini lupus est*: Man to man is a wolf, as the Roman proverb runs. And in an academic world in which professional interests and livelihoods, if not the fate of the humanities and humanity, are at stake, it is easy to treat each other rapaciously. Postmodern theory is the wolf huffing and puffing at the beleaguered door of humanism. Humanism is the wolf lurking deceptively under comfortable grandmotherly clothing. To construct an inhuman, monstrous Other provides a position to define oneself against, to give shape to what might otherwise be somewhat nebulous value systems, and to establish a hierarchy in which one’s own term in a spurious yet nonetheless seductive binary is privileged. I’ll be turning in a moment to the ways in which such binary thinking is becoming increasingly unsettled from within the very grounds of humanism and theory; however, it’s important to initially consider more specifically what has been at stake in competing considerations of the human and the humane, and of the presumed humanity that attaches to these markers.

To sketch this consideration from a humanist perspective, postmodern theory is seen as monstrous since tenets such as the social construction of human identity, the mythical quality of any idea of universal “human nature,” the linguistic construction of reality, and the contingency of meaning and provisionality of truth appear to threaten to undermine the values seen as crucial to the maintenance of a humane—in fact, “truly” human—society. If humanism emphasizes individual “creativity, freedom, and
purpose” and sees history as “a product of human thought and action” (Soper 16, 12), postmodern theory pulls back the curtain on the illusion of freedom and purpose through its deconstruction of the human subject as non-transcendent, and its notice of the concomitant circumscription of human agency by innumerable hegemonic and unassailable social forces.\(^5\) The resulting human impotence is reminiscent of the hopelessness Buffy initially feels in fighting against the omnipotent Adam, the “biomechanical demonoid” creation of Initiative director Maggie Walsh, cobbled together from the most lethal body parts harvested from captured demons, combined with indestructible technological components, and endowed with the sentience of a human being—albeit an amoral, myopically conquest-driven sentience. In this figuration, Adam stands in for an apparently insurmountable combination of social forces: man’s capacity for inhumanity and violence, scientific inquiry turned to the service of imperial power and human destruction, the ideological imperatives of undemocratic governmental bodies, and the general ethical vacuity of the powers that be. The fact that Adam begins to kill and reanimate humans to serve him as mindless, speechless minions further suggests the ultimately dehumanizing effects of such oppressive forces. While the images of the reanimated humans are rather sensationally horrific, their incognizant behavior bears a disturbing resemblance to the blind obedience to the orders of the military and unquestioning acceptance of government ideologies characteristic of the more human members of the Initiative (not least because Adam’s automatons are in fact former Initiative operatives). Such is the monstrously inhuman drone situated at the bottom of the slippery slope of pervasive humanist perceptions of postmodernism. In contrast stands the ultimate self-assertion of Riley Finn, who declares in strenuous humanist fashion, “I can’t be programmed: I’m a man.”

From a humanist perspective, postmodern theory also monstrously undermines clear conceptions of the humane/inhumane by challenging the foundation of any absolute truths about humanity or the human condition upon which ethical or moral imperatives, rules, or laws might be based. Given that such imperatives are necessary to further purportedly humanist progress toward improving the human condition, postmodernist antifoundationalism is easily characterized as itself inhumane—even more so as such antifoundationalism is perceived by humanists as buttressing an amoral, empty relativism in which the relative “truths” of inhumane views
and behaviors might bear equal weight to more humane ones. In an ironic reversal of the inhuman drone example above from the Buffy episode “Goodbye, Iowa,” in the later “New Moon Rising” episode, when Riley Finn begins to think for himself, questioning the dictates and purposes of the Initiative and considering the possibility of multiple relative “truths” with regard to the human/humane, he’s accused of disloyalty by an Initiative commander and even called an anarchist. Similarly, postmodernism’s supposed relativism appears disloyal, even nihilistic, to humanist visions of progress toward greater human freedoms because it both challenges the possibility of such freedoms and renders unstable the foundations upon which they might be established.

From a postmodern theory perspective, humanism is seen as monstrous for its complicity in spuriously humane and moral value systems that have in practice buttressed the marginalization, oppression, and even extermination of Others (individuals, cultures, nations) too numerous to count. For the anti-humanist postmodernist, so-called humanist practices have also led subjects (I hesitate to say “humans” or “humanity” in this context) to be dupes, interpellated with the illusion of free will into oppressive social systems, such as ideological state apparatuses. One historical legacy of humanist conceptions of universality has been the marginalization, if not outright rejection or attempted eradication, of differences rooted in gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, and nationality. In this sense, the Holocaust and the Russian Gulag, to cite just two chief examples, are “brought to you,” as it were, by humanism. In the “New Moon Rising” episode, when Buffy has a “momentary wiggins” upon learning that her friend Willow has moved from a heterosexual relationship to a lesbian one, her longstanding acceptance of difference and postmodern self-reflexivity allows her to recognize that she was briefly in a “totally black and white space”—an experience she is able to share with Riley as he processes his disturbing experience of the Initiative’s treatment of Oz. Riley ultimately must acknowledge his bigotry, given the primarily external markers he has believed indicate an essential human nature (what Buffy identifies as the “Mr. Initiative”-speak of “demons bad, people good”), and his complicity in the inhumane treatment that has been sanctioned by the dismissible status of non-human others. The identification by the Initiative of all non-humans as “hostiles,” “animals,” “demons,” and...
“monsters” deemed fit only for extermination or exploitation is only too reminiscent of the darkest side of humanist Othering.

The social forces postmodernism characterizes as constraining individual human subjects may be considerably debilitating to human agency, but individuals must be aware of their situatedness within a nexus of such forces or the human freedom posited and sought by humanists is largely illusory. To assume one is free is not necessarily to be free; to act without understanding why one acts is not necessarily to be an agent. Prior to Riley’s critique of the values and agenda of the Initiative, he affirms, “I am how they trained me.” Though Riley believes, as Maggie tells him, that they’re working “for the greater good,” he is unable to describe just what this “greater good” is and how precisely he contributes to it. Postmodernism, rather than being merely relativist or nihilistic, importantly demands that particular givens, such as race or free will, be reevaluated as constructions, and as Riley breaks free of his Initiative training, he states, “I don’t know which team I’m on, who the bad guys are . . . I thought I knew—I don’t know anything . . . . Who do you believe? First it sounds like lies, then it sounds like truth.” This discovery of the absence of solid foundations is certainly unsettling, but rather than stalling at an empty relativism, it ultimately allows for Riley to make more informed and self-reflexive (if never unequivocal) choices in the service of the humane, rather than merely allying himself with a group and following orders without question.

It’s not difficult to recognize how the reciprocally perceived monstrousness of postmodernism and humanism have appeared to some as resolutely unassimilable. Naturally, then, it would be unsettling to look into the eyes of one’s nominally monstrous Other and register a glimmer of something not other, but in fact like oneself—a truly uncanny recognition of the familiar at the heart of the unfamiliar. Yet this startling recognition of similarity within difference is precisely what underlies those discussions now most crucial to the future of the humanities, particularly in relation to what I want to posit here as their complicated, but I would argue hopeful and productive, hybrid grounding in the ideals of humanism and the critiques of postmodern theory. I’m going to turn briefly, then, to some moments of familiarity-within-difference through which aspects of an uncanny hybrid of liberal humanism and postmodern theory, I would argue, have been gestating.
Consider the recent work of Edward Said and Terry Eagleton. Said, in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, a series of lectures collected shortly before his death in 2003, and Eagleton, in *After Theory*, also published in 2003, have both spoken eloquently on behalf of humanism or humanistic ideas, and have been critical of postmodernism. Said declares that he has not “been convinced of the arguments put forward in the wake of structuralist antihumanism by postmodernism or by its dismissive attitudes to what Jean-François Lyotard famously called the grand narratives of enlightenment and emancipation.” Based in part on his own experiences with collective human action, Said argues in contrast that

people all over the world can be and are moved by ideals of justice and equality . . . and the affiliated notion that humanistic ideals of liberty and learning still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation, for instance, and to try to overturn despotism and tyranny, both strike me as ideas that are alive and well. And despite the (in my opinion) shallow but influential ideas of a certain facile type of radical antifoundationalism, with its insistence that real events are at most linguistic effects, and its close relative, the end-of-history thesis, these are so contradicted by the historical impact of human agency as to make a detailed refutation of them here unnecessary. (10)

Eagleton similarly argues for a history of a great deal of successful “collective action,” of revolution against oppression and war, about which he says “[m]uch recent cultural theory has little recollection”; instead, “for some postmodern thought, consensus is tyrannical and solidarity is nothing but soulless uniformity” (2003, 12–13). Yet Said’s and Eagleton’s humanistic and radically “democratic” intellectual work bears striking resemblance to intellectual work pursued under the aegis of theory. The rhetoric of political action, for example, was pervasive at the 2003 *Critical Inquiry* symposium in Chicago that gathered some of the most important theorists working in the academy today. In W.J.T. Mitchell’s symposium redux, “Medium Theory,” he asserts that “criticism and theory in our time has been closely associated with progressive political thought and action,” and that “the CI symposium was meeting in a moment of crisis for its own
mission, understood as an intellectual, interdisciplinary microcosm of a global crisis, and as a global mission for peace and justice.” The situation here is that of Riley Finn, who wants to work for the greater good, and who has not yet quite discovered the unexpected solidarity he could find if he looked deeply enough into the eyes of the monstrous Other. Once the postmodernist and the humanist learn to see past what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls the “representational project” of portraying the Other as monster, each (to adapt Cohen’s language) can learn to in fact “incorporate the Beyond (which originates from within)” (7).

Cohen characterizes the “threat” of the monster as, in part, “its propens- sity to shift” (5). From a humanist perspective, this shiftiness might be embodied in what appears to be the moral and ethical relativism of postmodern theory. As the Initiative illustrates, it’s much easier to maintain solidarity and unity in the service of collective progressive action if a given group has unilaterally shared goals and an unswerving commitment to them. And yet the quasi-fascist Initiative mode of uniformity is not the only model for collective action. Buffy and her friends are a clear case in point: while they rely on both cooperative dialogue and dissent to establish a clear understanding of their goals, their consistent collaboration and consensus are crucial to carrying out such goals. In a similar vein, Eagleton asserts that “[t]he postmodern prejudice against norms, unities and consensuses is a politically catastrophic one” (2003, 15–16), for quite often it is norms and conventions that help to counter oppression and to protect difference and the marginalized so valued and tarried over by postmodern theory. Homi Bhabha’s sentiments in his CI symposium statement complement those of Eagleton: while calling for affirmation of “the careful virtue of tolerance” integral to his own work in the politics of difference via postcolonial theory, Bhaba asserts that we also must “move beyond [tolerance] to achieve an imaginative virtuosity of ‘identification’,” and he also calls for “the careful cultivation of a shared sense of ethical confidence in making our choices free and fair.” Riley’s ultimate recognition of Oz’s humane monstrosity and his belief in Oz’s status as human is just such an “imaginative virtuosity of identification” that allows him to make the “free and fair” ethical choice to defy the Initiative and attempt to liberate Oz.

Eagleton also calls for belief in at least some absolute truths, such as the evils of racism, the oppression of women, and the poisoning of the
planet through corporate greed (2003, 106, 109), because without certain absolute and common grounds on which to challenge particular social wrongs, collective political action is difficult, if not impossible. To some, theory’s reputation for a tendency toward empty (read: amoral, apolitical, and/or ethically void) relativism and indeterminacy has undermined its grounds for effective political action, in which case it might well be characterized as less than humane. In “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” social theorist Bruno Latour’s opening essay in the Critical Inquiry issue dedicated to the journal’s symposium, makes a point corollary to Eagleton’s. Latour is particularly concerned with the ways in which relativist arguments have been co-opted in support of ideologies of the oppressive and pernicious kind that theoretical critique has been dedicated to demystifying. “[E]ntire PhD programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated[,] unbiased access to truth, that we always speak from one standpoint, and so on,” notes Latour, “while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives” (emphasis mine). While Latour does not turn iconoclast here and deny the theoretical questioning of “sure ground” on which to base absolute truths, he does ask, “what does it mean, when this lack of sure ground is taken out from us by the worst possible fellows as an argument against things we cherished?” The danger now, he speculates, may no longer

be coming from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact—as we have learned to combat so successfully in the past—but from an excessive distrust of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases! While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we have now to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the illusion of prejudices?

Latour effectively highlights here the significance of the theoretical critique of oppressive dogmatism, but also makes clear the ways in which the
postmodern underpinnings of progressive political critique can be turned against it, and further considers, as Eagleton does, whether there might now be a call to establish particular facts (in a presumably un-postmodern way) as absolutely true.

As with Latour, many of the original participants in the CI symposium exhibited a high degree of thoughtful critique and self-reflexivity, both in the sense of the continuing critique of culture and society and the critique of their own theories. Since theory has been characterized as reflexive, as “a discourse which turns back on itself” (Barthes 144), such critique and self-reflexivity among the CI theorists is perhaps unsurprising (though some might be surprised at the willingness to take individual responsibility, as Latour does, for the ramifications of earlier positions). Said characterizes humanists as similarly self-reflexive, despite widely held contrary perceptions, which contrary perceptions, for Said, are accurate only with regard to particular misguided and dogmatic humanist practitioners, rather than “true” humanists (13). Drawing on Vico, Said describes humanistic knowledge not as totalizing and transcendent—theory’s major charges against it—but as “radically incomplete, provisional, disputable, and arguable” (12). Said continues that humanism today must “take account” of that which it has repressed or deliberately ignored in its original White and Eurocentric incarnations (46). Humanists, he argues, “must situate critique at the very heart of humanism, critique as a form of democratic freedom” (47).

As humanism and postmodern theory each turn increasingly self-reflexive about their past histories, contemporary statuses, and future trajectories, they most often perceive themselves as functioning within some sort of originary body of ideas—as Said does in positing a critique of “humanism from within humanism” (9), or as Mitchell does in advocating for a “medium theory” as a mediating discourse, just as Critical Inquiry, the home of a great deal of theoretical scholarship, “was born,” avers Mitchell, “as a mediating institution, a place for debate and dialogue among the human sciences.” Notably, much as Said and Eagleton deploy postmodern modes of thought in their humanist or “after theory” discourses, in a number of the published statements for the CI symposium, participants self-identify as humanists, but they do so without any explicit indication of what this might mean in intellectual practice, particularly in relation their firmly established and continuing commitments to the valua-
tion of difference, the necessity for pluralism, and the discursive nature of reality. What I want to suggest here is that humanist thought and postmodern critique have been slowly moving toward acceptance of the monstrous Other—the “difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction” (Cohen 7)—that has really been at the heart of each all along.

Although I’ve focused above on the manner in which humanism and postmodern theory have situated themselves antagonistically against each other’s supposedly “monstrous” thought, it would likely be damaging for the two to adopt a potentially quietist assimilative strategy in order merely to “play nice” or become a harmonious whole. A Hegelian dialectic might seem appropriate, and yet I share Derrida’s concern that Hegel’s vision of third-term incorporation threatens to drain radical difference of its revolutionary potential. Humanism shouldn’t allow the wolf of postmodern theory to blow its entire house down, nor should it set out to de-fang the bite of postmodern critique; however, to point out some of their respective areas of familiarity within difference is to hope that the resultant frisson promotes their pleasurable dynamic interaction rather than a fearful shudder of rejection. The intense investment in the purported “fate” of the humanities and humanity at stake in earlier discussions of humanism and postmodernism is still at stake, despite the fact that the binaries between them are breaking down. But I would argue that it is precisely because such issues are still at stake that the binaries are in fact breaking down, opening a space within which a productive hybrid can develop that is better suited than its individual parts to addressing the future trajectory of the human and the humanities. The uncanny similarity-within-difference of particular aspects of humanist thought and postmodern critique are much akin to the eventual recognition of shared values and ideals on the part of both Riley Finn (whose belief in the absolute monstrosity of “monsters” has kept him from fully aligning himself with Buffy) and Buffy’s group (whose belief in the absolute inhumanity of the Initiative has kept them from fully trusting Riley), all of whom, despite their considerable differences, at least know what they can together ally themselves against: the lies, deceptions, brutality, oppression, dangerously us/them mentality, and ultimately horrific agenda of the Initiative. That the galvanizing moment for this recognition centers around the story of Oz and how best to understand and accept his hybrid nature suggests the relevance of the figure of the werewolf with regard to developing a usefully hybrid conception of
the nature, limits, and potential of the human. And that humanist thought and postmodernist critique have been such powerful positive and negative influences on the fate of the human suggests their discursive centrality to such a hybrid conception, which might be characterized as a monstrously humane postmodernism or a monstrously postmodern humanism.

Although the humane werewolf of William of Palerne calls into question a reliance on external markers of humanity and monstrosity, this werewolf doesn’t offer a sustainable hybrid vision of the human, for though he is productively hybrid throughout much of the romance, he is released unequivocally from his bewitched form at the end of the tale, and the category of “(hu)man” is clearly privileged as the wolf entirely disappears. Further, his humanity remains a constant that is merely hidden, not absent, in his wolf persona, whereby his wolf form is more mask than troubling constitutive monstrosity. Within the teratology of the (Joss) Whedon-verse of Buffy, however, the figure of the werewolf seems especially suited to thinking through a hybridity comprised of both the monstrous (which we might say here means “that which disturbs complacent thought”) and the human. Oz the werewolf externally manifests and experiences life as human the majority of the time, but is in essence continually aware of and threatened by the nascent irruption of the monstrous from within. Even when Oz imprisons himself during the full moon in order to prevent himself from harming or killing people while in wolf form, he often cannot be contained once his more powerful monstrous self takes over. After one such escape, and more importantly after he recognizes his intense attraction and repulsion to a female werewolf who conceives of her monstrous freedom (here, freedom to destroy) as superior to the limitations of the human, Oz must come to terms with his hybridity. “The wolf is inside me all the time,” he confesses in the episode “Wild At Heart.” “I don’t know where the line is and what that means.” In Oz’s personal situation, coupled with his antagonistic relationship to the Initiative, lies the complexity of the figure of the werewolf: he is a walking performative contradiction in that he is both human and non-human, humane and inhumane, dominator and oppressed, self-reflexive and mindless, self-controlled and dangerously free.

In the context of a humanist-postmodernist hybrid, the figure of the werewolf holds in tension several possible initial readings of a newly hybridized relationship. First, that the wolf represents for both humanists and
postmodernists what each most fears about the other, in the sense that the monstrous manifestation of those fears in the realm of the social threatens to undermine what each “group” stands for as humans. Second, that the wolf represents the latent monstrosity within each system of thought itself, such as the propensity in postmodern thought, in its efforts to highlight forces of constraint on agency, to strip the human entirely of fully conscious choice and therefore agency, or such as the humanist propensity, in an effort to identify a common humanity in the service of its greater actualization, to in fact limit the human by eradicating productive differences. Third, that the wolf represents the danger of each system of thought somehow losing its distinct identity and the vision of the human it stands for, and therefore being unable to define the line between, say, the humane and the inhumane. Although in light of these readings that the figure of the werewolf might represent a threatening assimilation of humanism and postmodern theory, such a hybrid might instead embody their marvelous union: marvelous in a manner that draws on the word’s senses of “excit[ing] wonder or astonishment” and “having remarkable or extraordinary (as if supernatural) properties.”

The productive hybridity of a monstrously humanist postmodernism, or monstrously postmodern humanism, begins with an understanding of the hybrid individual, the hybrid “I.” Postmodernism has deconstructed the humanist autonomous self and has emphasized instead constructed subjectivities, the scattering of identities, and the “somenesses” that dwell within the subject. We need to retain from this deconstruction of the automatric human subject the commitment to demythologizing those social forces that have historically limited or might one day limit self-determination, such as the marketplace and the “corporate” value systems stemming from epistemologies and institutions as varied as religion, science, the government, and even one’s own family. One of the strongest contributions of postmodern critique to our understanding of the human has been to help delineate such forces and their negative influences with the result that our analysis of them can contribute to greater freedoms for the individual—a goal shared by humanists. For once those forces that have constrained capacities for self-determination have been stripped away, some individual must remain who is not merely a collection of resistances held together through the strenuous and continued rejection of external social forces. In other words, there is more to what “I” am than simply what “I”
am not or what “I” am pushing against. Further, we must not become so exhausted in the process of identifying forces of constraint that we fail to account for and embrace the ways in which forces emanating from many of the same potentially constraining loci—spiritual beliefs, areas of empirical knowledge, political parties, families—can support and sustain us, and do not solely threaten us. To be a monstrously humane postmodernist is to somehow be a constant traveler between the spaces of contingency and more absolute “grounds.”

Although Oz in *Buffy* acts as the most explicit example of a monstrous hybrid, in “New Moon Rising,” Riley Finn also becomes the monstrous hybrid “I” through his recognition and acceptance of Oz’s hybrid human wolfishness, and he unexpectedly intervenes to try and stop Oz’s torture at the hands of the Initiative, declaring even as Oz shifts back and forth from and into his wolf form, “Leave him alone: he’s human!” Here, Riley not only explicitly voices his acceptance of the challenges to his us/them thinking posed throughout his romantic relationship with Buffy, but shortly afterwards he also directly defies the Initiative in favor of rescuing Oz. When he ultimately leaves the Initiative, what should be a traumatic moment (the Initiative commander’s last words are “you’re a dead man”) becomes a declaration of Riley’s self-definition: “I’m glad I know where I stand.” The figure of the werewolf, as well as of the human who sees himself in that werewolf, could extend to encompass those working toward a productive postmodern-humanist hybridity. The qualities of self-reflexivity, and particularly the ability to shift shape and transform oneself in light of new ideas and challenges, highlight as well why the figure of the werewolf is well-suited as the image of the monstrously human/humanely monstrous. Monstrous humans such as the zombie or the mummy are merely the living dead: the former the antithesis of self-reflexivity in its mindlessness (or in some versions, its obedience to a controlling force), the latter an image of ossification, the resurrection of a thing from the past and introduced without circumspection into the context of a later time. Vampires, though capable of independent thought and action, are necessarily self-centered rather than self-reflexive, driven by their need to feed on the lives of others, or to replicate their living dead selves in the service of sameness rather than hybridity. The werewolf, by contrast, has commitments to different, seemingly opposed worlds, and for all of his shape-shifting, never really abandons one for the other.
To become the hybrid “I” is to accept personal responsibility for one’s self-determination in part by drawing on those humanist qualities that contribute significantly to one’s human(e) nature, and acting on those qualities, such as Eagleton’s shortlist of human “moral capacities,” which includes selflessness, care and protectiveness, and ultimately, love (2003, 169). Buffy, for example, confronts Maggie Walsh, her psychology professor, over Maggie’s cold-hearted response to Buffy’s friend and Oz’s girlfriend Willow, who is emotionally distressed at Oz’s continued absence from campus. Buffy tells Maggie that “as someone who teaches human behavior, you might try showing some.” Compassion is clearly established here as an integral aspect of the human(e), as is speaking out in the face of cruelty. The hybrid “I” is also an individual who both seeks a self and is selfless. Oz leaves Sunnydale in order to come to a better understanding of who he is as a hybrid human creature, as well as in the hope of learning to control his monstrous tendencies so that he is not a threat to others; Buffy and her friends continually risk their lives in the service of others despite their efforts rarely being recognized or appreciated. To act continually out of self-interest is the province of the soulless demons and vampires who serve as “enemies” in the series. Finally, the hybrid “I” must keep his or her “inner cool” (as Oz learned to do in Tibet through meditation in order to avoid the mindless emotional rages that can trigger his monstrous transformations), and yet this “I” must also allow emotion to temper what might be a too-dispassionate theoretical engagement with the world and decisions to be made in it. Eagleton discusses human senses as one way of supporting our unity as a species (2003, 155–56). I would add that the human tears that can be a somatic response to human suffering, the flushed face and racing heart that can be a somatic response to witnessing injustice, while not infallible guides to identifying and putting a halt to acts of inhumanity, are certainly one way in which we may experience the welling up of an (essentially?) humane nature and be motivated to act on our feelings, and not remain solely in the intellectual sphere.

The hybrid “I,” then, maintains a sense of self within the highly charged field of positive and negative external forces, is eternally self-reflexive and open to critique, is compassionate and selfless, and is in touch with certain emotions as potential guides to human(e) behavior. A second stage to understanding and enacting a possibly productive postmodernist-humanist hybridity is to acknowledge the situatedness of the hybrid “I”
within a broader community, which in the context of my argument must be the hybrid “we.” The necessity of the hybrid “we” makes clear that the hybrid “I,” despite the motivation to be a self-determining individual, cannot merely be the liberal individual (characteristic of modernism) or the Romantic/post-Romantic exile. As John McGowan argues, the freedom of such an individual has in practice generally meant a negative human freedom in the sense that it is a freedom attained at the expense of a separatist orientation to society: a declaration of difference and espousal of antifoundationalism that too often stops in thought (1991, 13). Here, the turn from a postmodern individuality structured only through difference (and therefore not a hybrid “I”) must be tempered with a humanist commitment to placing one’s individuality within the context of a broader humanity: the hybrid “I” therefore becoming part of the “we”—the latter idea itself implicitly hybrid (an individual both “I” and “we,” and perhaps one day a form of the human-within-the-inhuman). That the “we” must also be hybrid indicates that the “broader humanity” of humanism, once reductively and oppressively Eurocentric, must be tempered with the postmodernist commitment to difference. This consideration of a truly inclusive broader humanity was one of Said’s greatest contributions to contemporary humanist thought, though he doesn’t label this attention to difference postmodern, but instead locates it within the earlier humanism espoused by thinkers such as the eighteenth-century scholar Giambattista Vico. I understand the distinction that Eurocentrism was the fault not of humanism itself, but of “humanist practitioners” (Said 13), but I would argue that if humanist thought were inherently truly inclusive, exclusionary humanisms should have been impossible. Postmodernist critique highlights this fact and helps to further impel the self-critique Said places at the heart of a humanism that would not be “a way of consolidating and affirming what ‘we’ have always known and felt, but rather a means of questioning, upsetting, and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial, and uncritically coded certainties” (28).

The hybrid “we” is not only a hybrid humanist-postmodernist “we,” and a hybrid “we” indicating our commitment to a broader human community, but is also hybrid in the sense that this “we” is a floating signifier, able to refer to a number of different communities to which we belong and to also cross between and through the communities of those varied social formations that can support and sustain us. The hybrid “we,” then, indi-
cates our allegiance to the myriad identity formations within the so-called human species—which, like all living forms, tends toward variety, adaptation, and shape-shifting. And the hybrid “we” must be prepared to learn not only from the typical communities we turn to for support, but also from communities of Others. This commitment includes care and consideration for the ways in which globalization and economic imperialism threaten cultural difference by absorbing the “them” into an “us” formation that, far from developing hybridity, serves to create only an oppressive sameness. Further, as Said has reminded us, “there are other traditions” and “other humanities” (3). The hybrid “we” must involve, pace Said, a complex recognition that the human is “subject to heterogeneous realities,” rather than a superficial recognition of the Other in the service of a “lazy or laissez-faire, feel good multiculturalism,” and an understanding that “civic co-existence” is integral to the development of a more humane world (Said 49–50; see also Sen 149ff.). To imagine the collective “we” more broadly, we must work within the humanities to integrate the ideas, concerns, and texts of Others—not as if they were somehow “new” formulations that must be accommodated, but instead with an understanding that they have been present all along, and that we have too often been unwilling, unprepared, or unaccustomed to seeing them. In the latter context, Said draws attention to the urgency of our dedication within the humanities to what I call here the hybrid “we”: he references the Eurocentrism and elitism within the ostensibly humanist position during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, and notes with horror the post-9/11 resurgence of Allen Bloom and William Bennett-style “thumping oratory about reclaiming a heritage and a core of traditional values” in the service “of justifying America’s apparently limitless war against evil” (20).

The postmodernist-humanist “we,” made up as it is of self-reflexive hybrid “I”s aware of their personal responsibility for their roles in shaping their own and others’ future(s) is especially well suited to avoiding the dangerous lure of what Said labels the “falsely collective ‘we,’” not only in the context of historically blinkered humanist practitioners, but also in contemporary contexts that hail us into communities of which we may not want to be a part. Much as Riley included himself un-self-reflexively into the “us” of the Initiative’s militaristic-imperialist thinking, Said denounces the “moral blindness” inherent in many Americans’ uncritical acceptance of the pronouns “we” and “us” as deployed, for example, by President
George W. Bush and the media: “Who is the ‘we’ who bombs civilians or who shrugs off the looting and pillaging of Iraq’s astonishing heritage . . . ? One ought to be able to say somewhere and at some length, I am not this ‘we’ and what ‘you’ do, you do not do in my name” (79–80). The hybrid “we,” in contrast to the “falsely collective ‘we’,,” commits itself to considering the heterogeneous realities of the world. McGowan’s closing statement in “The Intellectual’s Responsibilities” captures the significance of such a commitment: “The wider their conception of responsibility, and the more capacious their sense of the other humans to whom they are answerable, the greater service intellectuals can render in making us ponder the terms on which our polity affords some people life, and justifies dealing out death to others” (2007, 60). Buffy herself is drawn in at first by the comfortably morally assured “we” of the Initiative community. However, as the Initiative’s lack of teratological understanding becomes increasingly evident—including what Buffy recognizes as their reductive belief that monsters are “just animals, plain and simple” and “aren’t sentient, just destructive”—Buffy continuously interrupts Initiative briefings and challenges Initiative directives with incisive questions about the Initiative’s “ultimate agenda” (Riley tells her she’s expected to “follow orders, not ask questions”). In fact, Maggie, the psychology professor who is also the director of the Initiative, attempts to have Buffy killed because she threatens to demystify the inhumane workings of the Initiative, and to “corrupt” Riley and potentially other Initiative soldiers—all of whom are in fact ordinary college guys who have aligned themselves blindly with the Initiative and have come to believe in their special status in maintaining the ostensibly beneficent purity of “us versus them.”

In contrast to the presumed uniformity within the rigid categories of such binary thinking, a productively communal hybridity is well represented at the end of season four of *Buffy* in the “Primeval” episode, when the members of Buffy’s community—each highly individual with respect to personality and talents—must integrate their strengths in order to defeat the seemingly omnipotent Adam. The group is literally united on a supernatural level through an “enjoining” spell that integrates *sophos*, *animus*, *spiritus*, and *manus*, each of which represents a signal attribute of the joined individuals. In the episode, these attributes are translated as mind, the intellect of Buffy’s Watcher (mentor) Giles; heart, the courage of her steadfast friend Xander; spirit, the inspiration of the Wiccan Willow; and
hand, the strength of Buffy herself. As a result of the spell, Buffy, already of preternatural strength, becomes a communally hybrid “super” human able to triumph over the spurious hybridity of the biomechanical demonoid. Adam believes he is fighting Buffy alone (she is the only human in the room), but when he taunts that she “cannot last much longer,” she replies, “we can” (emphasis mine). “You could never hope to grasp the source of our power,” she states, as she forcefully wrests and destroys the uranium core that is the primary source of Adam’s own ersatz life force—and metaphorically triumphs over the apparently insurmountable combination of “special” social forces he represents. Yet Buffy’s “super”-humanity in this instance is simply a magically enhanced coalescence of attributes that were only ever “merely” human to begin with; strip away the show’s veneer of fantasy and what remains is an image of the marvelous capabilities of the human, marked by an individual strength of will that can become yet more nuanced and powerful when positioned within the hybrid “we.”

The pleasures and challenges resulting from the intellectual give and take within our more academic communities of mind might help to invigorate the joining of the hybrid “I” with the “we”: such dynamic enjoining could help keep our intellectual work from becoming, as Richard Wolin fears, “routinized and disenchanted” (15), could perhaps keep us from becoming what Goethe once described as “[s]pecialists without spirit, sensualists without heart” (qtd. in Wolin 15). In the Buffy example, that the power of the hybrid mind, heart, and spirit coalesce at the service of the “hand”—Buffy’s physical battle with Adam—suggests as well the need for the hybrid “we” to constitute not only a community, but a community whose ultimate effect is through action. While such a tightly-knit group and such perfectly balanced cooperation are on the micro level and in the realm of the ideal (even the fictional), we might yet strive to develop such cooperative communities on the macro level and in the realm of the real. And such communities might exist not only to foster our sense of belonging or to share ideals in the realm of thought, but also in order to support the pursuit of goals in the realm of action.

Among those, such as McGowan, who have previously considered the relative contributions of and friction between humanist and postmodernist thinking, as well as those, such as Soper and Davies, who have explored traditional humanisms and the challenges to them more generally, the
question of action, of human agency, has always been key. To formulate and subscribe to a particular concept of hybridity does not automatically actuate either greater human freedom or the movement toward a more humane world. In this context, one key question posed by McGowan is how a “politics of heterogeneity” can be put into practice (1991, 21). In Buffy, it’s not enough for Riley Finn simply to set Oz the werewolf free: he’s still potentially harmful to humans unless he learns to manage his own periodically destructive and devouring tendencies—as postmodern theorists must learn to do in order to keep from sliding into the supposedly empty or apolitical relativism so deplored by academic humanists, and as humanists must learn to do in order to keep from retreating to the uncritical views of universality and autonomy of self so persuasively challenged by postmodern critique. And while we’re thinking about the werewolf as a symbol of a particular sort of monstrous hybridity and marvelous possibility, such a possibility must be an active striving, not the bewitched or bitten passivity that marks many of the literary examples of incorporation into the human body of the werewolf. It is only through conscious “humanish” choice that we, like both our premodern and postmodern werewolves, can become purposeful agents in our respective worlds.

Such choice(s) might begin with the potential contributions of hybrid humanist-postmodernist thinking within the academy. One of the key questions asked of CI symposium participants involved, as Mitchell outlines, the “possible, probable, and desirable futures of criticism and theory in the human sciences,” including “the fate of the humanities, of literature, the arts, and philosophy, in what is widely heralded as a posthuman age” and “the relation of the coming criticism to politics and public life.” Dispersed among and through the potentially myriad formations of humanities disciplines, the progeny of a monstrous-marvelous hybrid of humanist inquiry and postmodernist critique could contribute to new ways of responding to such questions. If the humanities are conceived of not only as the study of humanity, but as involving a “global mission for peace and justice” (Mitchell’s description of the aims and trajectory of Critical Inquiry), then intellectual work dedicated to the development of the hybrid “I”/“we” among humanities scholars, and to promoting their agency—and indeed, their action—within and outside academic walls is fundamental. In an academic context, this includes committing to and doing our best to
integrate others/Others into the hybrid “I”/ “we.” Though theorists like McGowan, with his politics of heterogeneity, and Soper, with her socialist humanism, formulated their ideas some fifteen and twenty years ago, respectively—and there have been many elaborations upon their thinking since then—a great deal remains to be accomplished in the realm of self and collective intellectual actualization within the frame of a monstrous hybridity aimed at productive good in the world.

This may be in part due to earlier formulations appearing in the midst of, or too hard on the heels of, the polemics of the culture wars. It may also be due to a gradually increasing disillusionment about the efficacy of academic work in the service of social transformation. Eagleton, for example, believes that theory has “failed to deliver” on its promises, and launches against it a humanistically inflected diatribe:

It has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about essences, universals and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and distinterestedness. This, on any estimate, is rather a large slice of human existence to fall down on. (2003, 102)

Said similarly critiques the failure of humanism to live up to its potential, due, for example, to “its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire” (10), its academic elitism (16), and its fetishizing of the “sacrosanct, pastoral past” rather than attending to the important humanist project of “making history [or] of changing it” (17). Sander Gilman, in his CIsymposium statement, is critical of the legacy of intellectual work tout court, stating that “The track record indicates that for the last 4000 years intellectuals have not only been wrong almost all of the time, but they have been wrong in corrosive and destructive ways” (see also Wolin 12). Yet within the same symposium are also statements of hope for continued progress toward human justice and freedom, and calls for the development of new kinds of intellectual work in helping to promote these goals. So perhaps we can now take up hybridity from the vantage point of our recently-turned-twenty-first century, with the hindsight of several decades of debate over issues related to humanism, postmodern theory, academic
culture, and the fate of the humanities—a hindsight which, if not 20/20, is at least less nearsighted than much of our academic vision from the midst of the culture wars.

If the ideas of those theorists whose ideas I’ve drawn on here are any indication (and I think they are), academics are not only prepared to concede ground to former humanist or postmodernist adversaries but in fact look to these formerly monstrous adversaries for inspiration; they have also found at least one galvanizing impetus to do so in light of the 9/11 attacks and the incredibly frightening binary thinking—nationalistic, religious, militaristic—that has followed in their wake. But the hybrid “I”/“we” must commit to considerable work in order to initiate and spread further dialogic-cooperative, rather than monologic-antagonistic, conversation about the future of the human, humanity, and the humanities. And we must take advantage of our unusual freedom to do this, privileged as we are to by supported by institutions that foster intellectual work, to thinking ideas through and to considering how such ideas might deepen our understanding of ourselves and our world—and, crucially, to how such ideas might contribute, through a commitment to intellectual public discourse, to the development of a more humane world.

It’s easy to be skeptical—if not wary—of the results of intellectual public discourse given the ways in which intellectuals historically have so often erred in judgment or action; it’s easy to decry academic impotence in terms of real world impact given the potentially cloistered nature of our academic work. But while we must foster what Wolin calls “the virtues of humility” in light of past intellectuals’ “failed experiments in political utopianism” (13), and must consider the minatory alongside the celebratory, we must also avoid what Donna Dickenson describes as “the intellectual temptations of powerlessness” (69) and the resulting retreat to the comparatively uncomplicated havens of our ivory towers. The werewolf is a volatile creature, and perhaps the “safe” route would indeed be to lock the monster away or otherwise marginalize it, rather than to risk the danger of its running amok through academic and other human communities. But I believe these communities would be better served by their integration of the hybridity marked by the figure of the werewolf. Cohen understandably places the monster’s “conceptual locus at the margins of the world” (6), yet we need the marvelous monstrosity of hybridity to act within the centers of communities: the werewolf can’t merely lurk or wan-
der, but must stalk purposefully through the wilder-nesses of the world, begin-
ing in the groves of the academy. Werewolves need to bite, to infect others; their passion and energy, their humane monstrosity, their danger-
ous freedom must literally become infectious. And the werewolf has a pecu-
uliarly monstrous advantage in that it needn’t initially inspire fear or re-
jection, for it appears—as it is—quite human, and can therefore draw others closer to the radius of its attractive monstrosity before it reveals its difference.

It’s been argued that humane values depend upon our seeing ourselves as human (Haney 19), but while I’ve tried in some ways to humanify the supposedly monstrous aspects of humanism and theory, I want to allow for a positively-charged monstrous transmutation of the human/humane. I want to conceive of monstrosity not only as a function of difference, but as arising from hybridity. As is the case with the werewolf, this is not a hy-
bridity that provides a thoroughly harmonious integration of characteristics that inevitably must (and probably should) remain to some degree dist-
inct. The vision of a productively hybrid postmodern humanist is not directly analogous to that of a perfectly hybrid wolf-man who blends be-
nignly with the populace through holding in careful tension his warring impulses to behave humanely and to devour human beings on sight; how-
ever, a perfectly hybrid postmodern humanist might be equally problem-
atic in that, as William Blake once put it, “Without Contraries is no pro-
gression” (104), and a hybrid intellectual striving to be truly human(e) by merely canceling out contraries might well end up being self-devouring. In contrast, I’m conceiving of the birth of a monstrous hybridity for which we don’t yet have a name: one that combines paradoxically both comple-
mentary and contradictory humanist and postmodernist theoretical “genes” (or, cultural memes) in a way that fosters ongoing productive critical and cultural analysis without reductive, antagonistic Othering; that en-
hances our epistemological capacity to better understand ourselves and our world; that impels a perpetually self-reflexive reevaluation of the grounds of this understanding that nevertheless avoids paralysis; that com-
mits to choosing, acting, and achieving while recognizing the power of in-
umerable forces to compromise as well as to enhance this commitment; and that recognizes the reciprocal interactions, for good and for ill, be-
tween academic theorizing and material effects beyond the groves of the academy. It is my hope that the more complex and self-reflexive epistemo-
logical social orientation born of the twin contributions of humanist self-assertion and postmodernist critique will ultimately contribute to real impacts with positive consequences for the shaping of a more humane world.

As Colin Milburn reminds us, “In the work of Jacques Derrida, the figure of the monster embodies a means of thinking otherwise,” or what Milburn, drawing on Darwinian concepts of monstrosity, calls the “nascent germ of a species about-to-become” (603–4). A species born of our “thinking otherwise” about the relative roles of humanistic inquiry and postmodern critique in the humanities would be a truly marvelous creature, one that could excite wonder and have extraordinary properties within the academy, and perhaps extend more successfully to the world without. And to draw on a third sense of marvelous, it might well be “prodigiously or extravagantly impossible”—or at least seem to be so. As Derrida states, “there is no responsibility that is not the experience and experiment of the impossible” (qtd. in Egéa-Kuehne 118). And to participate in shaping the future of the human, of humanity, even if only through a continued exploration of the possibilities of the humanities, is a prodigious responsibility. My small contribution to this responsibility here is to propose that the monstrous discourse of humanistically rooted theory, alongside the monstrous presence of a theoretically grounded humanism, might well lead to the marvelous—if somewhat uncanny—progeny of a new species of humanities. The werewolf stalking purposefully through the wildernesses and universities of the world, partially constrained, dangerously free.

Notes

1. The progress of medieval notions of humanity is of course more complicated than a simple “man versus beast” to “man versus God” formulation can begin to express. However, to follow Williams and others (see, for example, Torrance 172 and Davies 126) in suggesting that a consideration of the human in relation to the divine, and not just in relation to beasts, begins to develop in the late medieval period is not necessarily to undercut the complexity of the human-divine relationship in the medieval period (on this point, see Myra Seaman’s essay in this issue).

2. The Initiative is comprised of military scientists and other operatives who, as revealed in the episode “Primeval,” represent “the government’s interests in not only controlling the otherworldly menace, but in harnessing its power for its own military pur-
poses.” Although the Initiative’s specific objectives are never revealed in their entirety, the group’s “research” and experiments on the captured demons are geared at least in part toward creating “the ultimate warrior,” a host of which would be placed in the service of the United States military. The early stages of this plan revolve around the creation of Adam, a ruthless and amoral “biomechanical demonoid” (demon + man + machine) programmed by Initiative director Maggie Walsh, and driven by a desire for power and domination, including power over his Initiative creators. The Initiative’s student-soldiers are unknowingly drugged daily to enhance their physical capabilities (the withdrawal from the drugs, should a soldier leave the Initiative, is depicted as life-threatening); student-soldiers are also monitored in their university dorm rooms via hidden cameras. Note that in season five of Joss Whedon’s Angel, a Buffy spin-off series, a Third Reich Nazi program called the “Demon Research Initiative” is revealed to have been a precursor to the U.S. military Initiative.

3. While William of Palerne is not precisely governed by the logic of “us” versus “them,” the romance ultimately upholds the equation of virtue with nobility, and the behaviors of William and Alphonse (the werewolf), both wronged heirs, are clearly lauded over those of their antagonists.


5. Within the context of my argument, I’m relying on “straw man” versions of humanism and postmodern theory based on how each, on occasion, characterizes its supposed Other. I should note that I am setting aside the atheist aspect of scientific-rationalist humanism, since I’m not interested here in the religious beliefs held (or not held) by either humanists or postmodernists, even were they uniform. Nor, for example, do I attempt to distinguish among different subcategories within humanism. Similarly, my accounts of postmodern theory subsume into one concept the respective challenges posed to humanism by postmodern and/or poststructuralist cultural theorists whose individual ideas can differ considerably in their particulars. My accounts of humanism are drawn largely from the work of Davies, Soper, and Said; Eagleton’s polemical The Illusions of Postmodernism establishes particularly well the views of postmodernism outlined here as my “anti-postmodern” view (although Eagleton does not speak in this text as a humanist anti-postmodernist).

6. Latour is referring here to a New York Times article citing a Republican lobbyist’s deliberate strategy to “make the lack of scientific certainty [about global warming] a primary issue” in order to maintain what Latour calls (following Paul Ehrlich) a “brown backlash” against regulations to restrict the manmade pollutants that contribute to global warming. Recent claims coming from within the academy that, depending on
your historical perspective, the Holocaust never happened (or did not happen the way many think it did) would be another excellent example.

7. See McGowan, Postmodernism and Its Critics 43–61 and 89–121 for a useful discussion of postmodern readings of the Hegelian dialectic, including Derrida’s.

8. On the idea of the self as a collection of “some-nesses” of being, figured by Deleuze and Guattari as “n minus 1,” see Deleze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus 6.

9. Sen’s book Identity and Violence similarly promotes acceptance of individuals’ multiple frames of identities and affiliations, and the role of conscious choice with regard to how we view ourselves, as well as our relationships to disparate collectivities. Sen is particularly concerned with self/Other and us/them versions of communitarian thinking, and traces historically the violent legacies of individuals aligning themselves with a single, too narrowly defined, collectivity (such as Bosnian versus Serb, Hutu versus Tutsi, Muslim versus Hindu), or with a broader but still totalizing and reductive communitarian formulation, such as West versus anti-West.

10. McGowan tries to “steer a path between liberal, humanist individualism and the poststructuralist deconstruction of the self” (1991, 243). Though I formulated my own arguments on hybridity before I read McGowan’s work, my arguments here are now indebted to this book, which I offer as seminal reading on the topic of human agency in light of postmodern critique. Soper similarly promotes an essentially hybrid humanism in her discussion of the “socialist humanist” position on agency, which characterizes humans as conscious and political agents with the capacity for an epistemological orientation to society that, if never fully realized, at least contributes to having “real impact[s] on their conditions of existence” (146ff.).

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The human long presumed by traditional Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment humanism is a subject (generally assumed male) who is at the center of his world (that is, the world); is defined by his supreme, utterly rational intelligence; does not depend (unlike his predecessor) upon a divine authority to make his way through the world but instead manipulates it in accord with his own wishes; and is a historically independent agent whose thought and action produce history.¹ It is this human—who is, as Tony Davies notes, “always singular, always in the present tense, . . . inhabit[ing] not a time or a place but a condition, timeless and unlocalized” (32)—that is the subject of traditional liberal humanism. His power and superiority inhere in his human essence. Yet in a posthumanist world, this human is an endangered species.

Such a statement is hardly news.² Foucault, in 1966 in The Order of Things, and Levi-Strauss, in 1962 in The Savage Mind, both revealed that “the human” had been invented by the Enlightenment when it “discovered” this supposedly sovereign subject. The ensuing denaturalization of this subject has challenged the ontological foundations on which traditional humanism, and thus much of Western society, has been based. The recognition that human subjectivity has been constructed by those who have claimed it as their exclusive feature has made room for alternative posthumanist philosophies.³ Posthumanism observes that there has never

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been one unified, cohesive “human,” a title that was granted by and to those with the material and cultural luxury to bestow upon themselves the faculties of “reason,” autonomous agency, and the privileges of “being human” (Davies 19; Hayles 286). As a result, not everyone whose biology would identify them as *homo sapiens* have “counted” as human (Fuss 2). Ideologically shaped distinctions have determined inclusion and exclusion, so that features with cultural significance, such as race and gender, have been misinterpreted as biologically significant and used as markers of supposed superiority or inferiority within the “species.” Posthumanism rejects the assumed universalism and exceptional *being* of Enlightenment humanism and in its place substitutes mutation, variation, and *becoming*.

The posthuman subject involves a critical deconstruction of the universal, liberal humanist subject, with the thought of Freud, Marx, Althusser, Foucault, and Derrida, among others, as central influences in this deconstruction (Badmington 4-10). Yet, outside of theoretical circles, the posthuman subject is often described as a physical counterpart (and successor) to the universal human. This alternative, or extended, human appears in popular culture as a corporeal being whose existence is the hypothetical result of certain developments in techno-science. It is a deliberately engineered form, the imagined product of breakthroughs, both fictional and real, in genetic manipulation, reproductive technologies, and virtual reality, and it reveals certain cultural anxieties about embodiment—perhaps most especially when that embodiment is rejected or overcome in the attempt to release a supposedly “pure” cognition. Embodiment always troubles the human “person,” and is a highly slippery entity despite its apparently concrete givenness. Caroline Walker Bynum writes,

> Sometimes *body, my body, or embodiedness* seems to refer to limit or placement, whether biological or social. That is, it refers to natural, physical structures (such as organ systems or chromosomes), to environment or locatedness, boundary or definition, or to role (such as gender, race, class) as constraint. Sometimes—on the other hand—it seems to refer precisely to lack of limits, that is, to desire, potentiality, fertility, or sensuality/sexuality . . . or to person or identity as malleable representation or construct (1995b, 5).
The second view—with the human “person” a “malleable representation or construct” and embodiment as unconstrained—has many affinities with theoretical posthumanism. The inherent pliability of the culturally produced body is celebrated by cultural theorists such as Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, who describe posthuman bodies as “the causes and effects of postmodern relations of power and pleasure, virtuality and reality, sex and its consequences. The posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image. . . . The human itself is no longer part of ‘the family of man’ but a zoo of posthumanities” (3). Theoretical posthumanism transforms the humanist subject into many subjects, in part by releasing the body from the constraints placed on it not only by nature but also by humanist ideology, and allowing it to roam free and “join” with other beings, animate and inanimate.

The popular culture posthuman, by contrast, envisions the challenges to the human as largely corporeal ones resulting from our supposedly intractable situatedness in the so-called natural world. In this case, what is called for is not a reconceptualization of what “counts” as human, but rather, an entirely new and supposedly better human form. In this view, the body limits and constrains individual freedom. Physical alterations—many of them quite radical and risky—are pursued not, however, to simply replace the weak body but to attain an extended lifespan and improved capabilities for the already-existing embodied human self. Modern technoscience, especially as depicted in the news media, encourages us to understand that self in terms of scientific discovery: we conceive of our personalities and dispositions as a genetic inheritance and chemical mixture, our brain as a computer hard drive, our memories as a series of snapshots, our minds as processors of encounters and observations that can be reprogrammed or even erased. Our bodies are machines to be fine-tuned and perfected through add-ons. So while technological and biological modifications to the body are intended to improve its inadequacies, their use indicates an investment in a distinctly individual and already human identity.4 Likewise, in the posthuman as it is imagined in popular culture, the bodily modifications are pursued because of the superior capabilities they can add to the already-established self. The “idea of person” indicated by such a desire reflects the “idea of person” in the Middle Ages: “not a concept of soul escaping body or soul using body [but] a concept of self in which physicality was integrally bound to sensation, emotion, reasoning,
identity” (Bynum 1995a, 11). The theoretical posthumanist conception of “person or identity as malleable representation or construct” is adamantly refused by popular posthumanism: the forms of our person may change, but identity—typically expressed in terms of “sensation, emotion, and reasoning”—persist.

Popular posthumanism cannot avoid recognizing, however, that altering the body through mechanical and biomedical improvements necessarily challenges our sense of identity, “integrally bound” as it is to “physi-cality” (Bynum 1995a, 11). Long-familiar processes and events such as aging, disease, and accident are made aberrant and deviant (Turner 28–29), and previously sturdy expectations of selfhood are shaken. As expectations of body change, expectations of selfhood change as well. This is the appeal but also the threat addressed by popular culture engagements with the posthuman. The pervasiveness of such a connection was exhibited in Rush Limbaugh’s response to Michael J. Fox’s appearance, during the 2006 mid-term elections, in a series of political ads supporting candidates in favor of stem cell research. In these ads, the symptoms of Fox’s Parkinson’s disease (typically controlled pharmaceutically when Fox is acting) were fully evident. On his radio program, Limbaugh attacked Fox by saying, “He is exaggerating the effects of the disease. He’s moving all around and shaking and it’s purely an act. . . . Either he didn’t take his medication or he’s acting” (qtd. in Montgomery C01). Limbaugh argued that Fox was performing, rather than being his natural or “true” self, by allowing his disease to reveal itself through its symptoms; the honest thing, the most authentic thing, according to Limbaugh, would be to cover up or alleviate the symptoms through medical treatment. His unmediated physical state thus becomes false, disingenuous, because medicine makes it avoidable. Not only Fox’s body but his very identity is altered by the disease. Such changes through disease leave us uncertain of the source of our identity; Bynum wonders for us all, “Are we genes, bodies, brains, minds, experiences, memories, or souls?” (2001, 165).

As reflected in popular culture depictions of the posthuman, this uncertainty is responded to with the assertion that although all of these possible features of our person can be modified (except, it is maintained, the “soul”), the experiences of the body—perceived through sensation and processed through emotion—remain the locus of individual identity. The self thus envisioned is most readily identifiable through its affect, a feature
that holds open even the biomechanically modified human to a vulnerability seen as essential to maintaining humanness. The techno-scientifically enhanced human—and the line between human and posthuman that it evokes but cannot define with exact precision—provides the opportunity to investigate those qualities supposedly associated exclusively with the human. It further reveals a desire to find a human identity that remains constant within a flexible and mutating body, and a key feature that tends to endure, in such scenarios, is emotion, especially as a conduit for significant encounters with and incorporation into the world. If the brain is a hard drive and the body a programmable machine, what distinguishes one human from another is the unique way these “parts” function to express a unique and holistic self that always remains just to the side of any hardware that might try to define it.

Medieval persons conceptualized such scenarios, although in different terms; they, too, examined and extended their selfhood through a blend of the embodied self with something seemingly external to it—not the products of scientific discovery, but Christ, as well as the promised embodiment after death his sacrifice ensured. In this way, the contemporary popular posthuman is (perhaps surprisingly) tied to the premodern, the time before the “discovery” of the human that thus might be labeled “prehuman.” In both cases (medieval and modern) the posthuman is not a distinct “other,” an entirely new species; instead, the posthuman is a hybrid that is a more developed, more advanced, or more powerful version of the existing self. The concept of the posthuman revealed in medieval and contemporary imaginative texts is less an inevitable state of being than it is a “taxonomic category” that suggests what people mean by “the human” in a given place and time (Graham 42). As Diana Fuss claims, it shows “the human” to be an incredibly “elastic fiction,” a quality exhibited in its ability to “mutate many times over” as the characteristics determining inclusion and exclusion have been repeatedly “redrafted to accommodate new systems of classification and new discourses of knowledge” (2). Bynum argues that twelfth-century thinkers viewed change as a development of the already-extant form into a new version of itself, rather than a complete change into something it was not already (1995a, 8). This view is shared by the contemporary popular posthuman as well; while features are adapted and weaknesses improved through scientific application, the self is not lost but enhanced, made not into another species but ultimately more
like itself, yet better. Through the hybridization of human and supplement, what is supposedly best about the human remains—its supposedly always open susceptibility, rooted in its unpredictable emotional responsiveness.

As Bynum, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and others have demonstrated, a fluid conception of the human such as that represented by the contemporary hybrid posthuman—part human, part mechanical or biomedical adjunct—is hardly the new and unnatural offspring of postmodern thought and modern science. Cohen writes that theorists tend to use “posthuman” to describe a “challenge to the boundedness of flesh,” the possibility for which was supposedly provided only recently by modern techno-science (2003, xiii). However, in the medieval imagination, the human body was commonly blended with the non-human in stories and also in images in manuscript marginalia depicting werewolves, hybrid ox-men, humano-floral mixes, and the like. Medieval werewolf stories, in particular, demonstrate the resistance of the supposedly essential human self to full absorption into non-humanness, particularly when considered in contrast to stories about werewolves in ancient and more modern traditions, where werewolves often threaten human survival and bring to vivid life the violent and rapacious beast latent within the human, often at the expense of the human identity which is ultimately overtaken by the supposedly “alter” animal self. In contrast, medieval werewolves tend to be “sympathetic” (Bynum 2001, 94)—they are human victims who manage to maintain in their wolvish bodies a rational mentality and human comportment. The werewolf’s physical state is not reflective of his inner corruption but rather offers him the opportunity to reveal his true (human) nature, through the great contrast between his appearance and his unexpectedly humane actions.

In his twelfth-century *History and Topography of Ireland*, Gerald of Wales relates a famous story about a priest’s encounter with a werewolf and his wife who ask the priest to give her the viaticum, which the priest agrees to do, but only after the she-wolf’s skin is peeled back to reveal a woman inside. To be a suitable sacramental recipient, her humanity must be confirmed. Gerald uses his example of the she-wolf to investigate whether such beings are human or brute animal, relying for judgment on Augustine’s example, in his *City of God*, of humans whose bodies become bestial while their minds remain human, having the capacity to reason (see Mills 33–34). This split, in Gerald’s story, is what permits the characters’
inclusion in the Christian community. The potentially more radical hybridity—a being both human and wolf simultaneously—is only suggested, for once the wolf skin is removed a complete human, both body and soul, remains. The wolf body was only superficial, like a suit of clothing, of a piece with itself and not physically integrated into the human inside.

In werewolf stories of the sort found in romances such as the fourteenth-century Middle English *William of Palerne* and Marie de France’s twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *Bisclavret*, the werewolf is more of a true hybrid, exhibiting human and wolf characteristics that appear interwoven, rather than being a human body and soul disguised in animal skins. However, the human nature of the individual is still exhibited amidst or over the hybridity, expressed through the human person’s affect and reason rather than through his physical form. The werewolf is both man and wolf, not one or the other or one after the other; yet human nature—in these cases, a courteous nature—dominates over and directs the wolf’s supposedly more ferocious instincts, which submit to the rational and sensitive “person” directing his movements and gestures.

In the opening lines of *Bisclavret*, Marie de France raises the specter of a monstrous transformation in which the bestial *does* overpower the human, when she explains that *her* werewolf, a Breton *bisclavret*, is not to be confused with the ferocious and rabidly inhumane *garulf* of Norman legend, who is a *beste salvage* (“savage beast”) who devours humans. Marie’s *bisclavret*, to whom she never assigns a proper name, is a victim of betrayal (twice over) who behaves not like a murderous monster and not even like a vicious wolf. The narrative traces the betrayal of an unnamed knight by his wife, who out of fear of his alter animal ego, arranges for his clothing to be taken while he is in werewolf form, thereby preventing him from returning to human body. It is important to note that even thought the knight must regularly turn into a wolf, he always goes away from home to undergo this transformation, so as to leave his wife and household untroubled and unharmed. After being abandoned to his wolf form and all alone in the woods, he is recognized by a king for his noble demeanor and human-like gestures; the king goes so far as to publicly declare the werewolf rational and to make him a member of his household. After repeatedly proving the validity of the king’s assessment, the werewolf uncharacteristically attacks two people who are visiting the court, surprising everyone who witnesses the assault, but only until it is learned
that the violence is not unprovoked bestial aggression but rather a case of rightful vengeance against his wife and her new husband, who was her accomplice in the earlier theft of his clothing. Thus the wolf’s one act of brutality is acknowledged as evidence of his “real” human nature, in that he acted as a wronged husband requiring justice. The *bisclavret* has a complete human nature, as exhibited by his reasoned actions and courteous behavior, which nevertheless are expressed through his lupine form. Human and wolf work together to pursue justice, both public and private.

*William of Palerne* centers on two human-animal characterizations, one of which is a true hybrid, the other superficial: the werewolf is simultaneously wolf and man, with his two natures united in the pursuit of his (human) ends, while the hero and heroine of the story simply dress up as various animals to avoid capture. But whether the animal appearance is genuine or feigned, both reveal the consistency of what medieval English culture considered to be an ideal human nature. In this complicated narrative of noble sons wrongly robbed of their inheritance, one royal son, the heir to the Spanish throne, Alphonse, is changed by his stepmother into a werewolf so that her own son will become king. In this form, Alphonse rescues another wronged heir, William of Palerne, whose uncle attempts to have him assassinated. William is then taken in first by a cowherd and later by the Emperor of Rome, whose daughter, Melior, becomes William’s beloved. When she is to be married off to the royal Greek heir, she and William escape, hidden (still wearing their noble clothing) inside white bear skins. Incapable of caring for themselves in the wild, they are fed and protected from predators by Alphonse the werewolf, who had previously rescued and raised William in his early youth. Later, their bear exteriors having been discovered by their pursuers to be disguises, the lovers switch to deerskins provided by the werewolf. The werewolf—who William proclaims is more human than he himself is—is indeed a wolf, with wolf instincts for hunting and protection against predators, unlike William and Melior, who are clearly just animal imposters: they can’t feed themselves and are easy prey. The werewolf must repeatedly preserve and rescue them. However, he also is obviously and fundamentally human: he rationally determines how to distract those seeking William and Melior (with his means for doing so depending on his instinctual wolf skills to distract and lose the hunting dogs), and he helps the young couple because he recognizes their true nobility and pities their plight. Based on their ex-
periences with him, the lovers decide the werewolf is human, regardless of his physique. In the man transformed into a werewolf, whose hybrid state is the result of a curse placed on him by his stepmother, and in the threatened lovers, who must be disguised as animals in order to hide their nobility from their pursuers, the human is forced by others’ inhumane behavior to take on animal form, but its self-identity is never fully replaced or covered over. Such stories present the possibility of physical boundary crossing but confirm the constancy of what medieval audiences believed was an essential human nature, one that was centered on reason and courtesy in Marie’s story, and on noble affectivity in William of Palerne. For medieval audiences the flexibility of the physical form was not matched by a dangerous fluidity of mind or nature. Instead, certain identities remain stable at the “core” of the external, shifting body.

This idea of a stability of human identity in the Middle Ages can be seen as rooted in the medieval conception of the relationship between human beings and the divine. For medieval readers, the unchanging “core” of identity is made manifest by the shape-shifting of Christ who becomes man, body and blood, then bread and wine, with no change in his divine essence. Hybridity is essential to Christ’s participation in the human, as he is both a human person embodied in a living history and also a divine trans-historical entity. In this regard, he models a posthumanity available to Christians who could share in his transhistoricity by ingesting pieces of his body and by believing in the resurrection of their bodies after death. Blendings of the human and inhuman—however discomfited many commentators showed themselves to be by such hybrids—thus confirmed and authorized medieval conceptions of human nature, because Christ’s hybrid embodiment as both human and God left undiminished his divine nature, a view that was officially supported by the Church. To that end, it declared heretical the Monophysite view that Christ had two wholly distinct natures, with his human nature being incomplete and his divine complete. A parallel view promoted by Nestorius held that these two natures are distinct but that the human is the more important, and it, too, was deemed heretical. Such attempts to discover a hierarchy within Christ’s hybrid identity were refused by the Church in favor of a single, unified, human-divine being. The apparently contradictory elements co-exist, producing a rich hybrid, which is nevertheless “one.” If Christ’s human self were only
metaphorical, or inferior, or purely human, theological claims for the unity and particularity of the individual in the afterlife would be lost.

The significance of that individual embodied identity was, within medieval Christianity, endorsed by the doctrine of bodily resurrection; as Bynum notes, the return of the physical self after death “makes the body crucial to the self in a way that it is not in most other cultural traditions” (1999). Hope in what Bynum terms the spatio-temporal continuity of individual identity, revealed in contemporary debates about the possibility of mind uploading,9 for example, was essential for medieval people as well. It inspired much of the period’s extensive theorizing about the logistics of individual resurrection. The issue now as then depends upon views toward the relationship between the tangible and intangible elements of personhood. In the Middle Ages, the fragmentation of a singular individual identity, a central question in debates about the doctrine of bodily resurrection, was rejected. From the very early days of Christianity, resurrection depended upon the extension of the self from this world to the next via the earthly body, which required (and assured) its material and spiritual integrity, even to, as Augustine was found of repeating, “the last hair on its head.”10 Theologians debated, for instance, how much of an individual body would need to be available after death (particularly a death involving dismemberment or digestion) in order for resurrection to be possible. Jerome and Augustine could not escape Tertullian’s concern with the re-assemblage of body pieces at resurrection (Bynum 1995a, 104), and the glory of resurrection was presented not in terms of a movement beyond the material through release into the spiritual, but instead in terms of the complete restoration of the body inhabited while alive, even with its scars, making it finally and permanently safe from further corruption. Bynum sees modern concerns over the integrity of the individual self in relation to a particular body, despite modern technology that allows for all sorts of “body-hopping,” as a product of the later Middle Ages, with its sense of personhood as comprising a “particular individual (not an essence)” and “a unity (not a mind/body duality)” (1995b, 33). Medieval views on resurrection required a continuity of identity, conceived of in terms of the continuity of the individual body that is necessary to sustain, or make palpable, a unique soul, or mind (see Bynum 1995a, 30, 37).

Because individual Christian personhood resided in both body and soul, both were involved in intimate communion with God. As Bynum
notes, in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries a new attitude toward the body accompanied Christocentric affective devotion, in which physicality was not an obstacle but a path to union with the divine (1988, 51). The existence of a perfect self is assured by the perfection of Christ’s human body and is made possible through the ingestion and incorporation of Christ’s body in the Eucharist (which does not decay, and thus protects human bodies from decay upon resurrection) (Bynum 1995a, 111). In 1428, a woman accused of Lollardy maintained that eating the Host “defile[d] and debase[d] him by a passage through the most inward, the most profanely, and profoundly dissolving of the body’s mediums” (Beckwith 24), but the Church disagreed, seeing ingestion and distribution as producing humanity’s holy union with Christ. The act elevated the Christian, rather than degrading Christ, just as the Incarnation raised the human rather than diminishing the divine. Sarah Beckwith argues that the creative brilliance of this conceit lies in the way it does not “create the transcendent through simple denial of the immanent, but rather makes of the finite, of the immanent, of the physical and mortal its very source of generative power” (114).

Christ’s affect was emphasized through his physical weakness, with his body an object of adoration that depended upon its ongoing violation, on the renewal of his sacrifice (Beckwith 4). The medieval meditation on the Seven Wounds of Christ, for example, interprets these wounds as “human attributes [that] came to emphasize his vulnerability” (Turner 11). But he was not, of course, only body, although his affectivity could be readily expressed through his human form, and it is this quality that perhaps most fully articulates his humanity: Aquinas, through Aristotle, Bynum explains, “connect[ed] wonder with pleasure and . . . associate[d] it with a desire that culminates not so much in knowledge as in encounter with majesty.” An encounter, not knowledge itself, is the ultimate goal. From this, Aquinas concluded that “the angel of the Annunciation shocked the Virgin because ‘wonder is the best way to grab the attention of the soul’ and insisted that Christ’s capacity to wonder was not an indication of discomfort but a proof of his humanity” (Bynum 2001, 50–51; emphasis added). Christ shares the affective responses of his followers, rather than being above those responses. Because he looks and (generally) behaves like them, but also because he feels like them, his followers know they can be joined to, and extended through, him.
In the fifteenth-century autobiography of Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, we can witness the very personal relationship with Christ that Kempe develops, which strikingly reveals the union of the human and the divine through the emotional experience of suffering in the world, and of being vulnerable to the world’s depredations. Kempe says that Christ told her, “I am in you, and you in me. And those who hear you, they hear the voice of God” (18), and thus positions his divinity as situated in a spiritual-physical fusion with her. Kempe’s embodied and even sensual participation in Christ’s posthumanity presented her readers with a voluptuous hybridity for which they were unprepared, despite the Church’s promotion of such a communion. Indeed, Kempe’s *Book* provides the details of her trial in Leicester, England for heresy, as well as her neighbors’ fear and condemnation of her. Hers is such an intense case of union through the incarnation that the textual representation of Kempe’s third-person subjectivity depends entirely upon her “imaging of the body of Christ” (Beckwith 5). In her first vision of him, Christ comes “in likeness of a man, most seemly, most beautiful, and most amiable that ever might be seen with man’s eye” (7–8). Through Christ’s beautiful, superlative body Kempe understands God’s goodness. Consistently, she focuses on God’s manhood rather than his godhood, explaining that the former is approachable, the latter frightening. When God asks for her hand in marriage in Rome, she “kept silence in her soul and answered not thereto, for she was full sore afraid of the Godhead, and she had no knowledge of the dalliance of the Godhead, for all her love and all her affection was set on the manhood of Christ” (63). She does not reduce God to mere man in her focus on Christ’s “manhood,” a gesture that would affiliate her with the Mono phy site heresy; instead, the emphasis in her articulation of her communion with Christ is on multiple and shared identities. Christ tells her that “those who worship you, they worship me; those who despise you, they despise me. . . . I am in you, and you in me” (18). Christ and Kempe, like Christ’s manhood and his divinity, are an indissoluble hybrid “one.”

Kempe attains this communion with Christ through a type of mental illness—as she puts it, “through [losing] her reason and wits, for a long time until our Lord by grace restored her again” (3). By losing, or letting go of, what most identifies her as human, her reason, she experiences a posthumanity in which she is no longer held back by temptation but instead “was perfectly drawn and stirred to enter the way of high perfection,
which perfect way Christ our Savior in his proper person exemplified” (Kempe 3). In order to experience this state, Kempe must not reason but rather she must feel—be “drawn and stirred”—confirming Aquinas’s description of Christ’s affectivity as revealing his affinity with humanity. Kempe’s state is supposedly beyond human, yet it remains utterly human as well: embodied, and intensely physical. She does not lose her humanity but she does become something not only human, something that, as Christ assures her, shares in his simultaneously divine and corporal being.

For those such as Kempe living in the premodern world, Christ’s embodiment of the divine in human form not only grounded the truth of the Word but also revealed the divinity available to the human; the eventual salvation promised through the incarnate intervention of the divine in human history thus elevated the subject (individually and collectively) above its mortal and corruptible state. For medieval Christians, the promise of participation in Christ’s human-divine hybridity, in which the body could be exceeded yet not entirely left behind, would have offered a seemingly liberating image of the posthuman. Similarly, the contemporary techno-scientific posthuman offers another kind of emancipation, promising the self—typically conceptualized in the form of the brain or mind—freedom from the limitations of the body. This techno-scientific fantasy has much in common with liberal humanism, in its “unalloyed faith in the primacy of the Enlightenment subject—rational, autonomous, self-determining” (Graham 159), and it extends that faith by pulling the curtain back on a world in which individuals can direct their evolution and subvert their mortality through mechanical intervention. The aim is to free “the essential, rational self [to] endure unimpeded” (Graham 9), akin to the promise of resurrection offered the medieval Christian but based on very different ideas about what that freedom is.11

The contemporary popular culture posthuman shares more with the medieval posthuman than with its historical peers: theoretical and scientific posthumanist discourses. It resists the loss of certain individually bounded identities celebrated by theoretical posthumanism and fears the reduction of self to the “all mind” hard drive promised by techno-science.12 By contrast, the popular culture posthuman exhibits certain anxieties about the possibility of becoming too posthuman, which calls to mind the response to Margery’s celebration of her hybridity expressed by her medieval neighbors, who shared her faith and hope yet feared some-
thing of their “selves” would be lost in the final transformation. These apprehensions are also apparent in popular culture, where Francis Fukuyama’s concern with the end of history is often articulated: “[T]he most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is the possibility that it will alter human nature and thereby move us into a ‘posthuman’ stage of history” (7). Techno-science fantasy narratives tend to be more optimistic about the possibilities offered by the posthuman than is Fukuyama, but they also reveal a desire to protect, or mourn the loss of, something long associated with personhood (since before the “discovery” of the human in the Enlightenment) of which science often seems neglectful: the emotional self.13

Fictional considerations of the posthuman future generally revolve around nightmare scenarios (most familiarly in the form of posthumans such as Darth Vader and Robocop and the Terminator), often employing a version of the apocalyptic posthuman described by Elaine Graham as “the fully technologized successor species to organic Homo sapiens” (9) and by Katherine Hayles as “a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” wherein there is no “natural self” (3). This extreme, wholly other posthuman, though a common fixture in science fiction, remains at the periphery of texts which center on a hybrid posthuman who retains a very familiar “natural self” and is an extension of rather than “successor” to the human being. This hybrid posthuman suggests possibilities of adaptation and continuation of the human, not only in resistance to but even within the posthuman, as a synthesis produced through enhancement rather than a full metamorphosis. Despite the threat presented in such narratives by technologies often spun out of control, the hybrid posthuman possessed of a “natural self” regularly expresses a faith in the resilience of the human and optimistically affirms that in the posthuman world the self is retained and invested with the potential to sustain humanity even in its newly developed form. The resilient characteristic affiliated by these texts with the human—typically presented in terms of “human nature”—is not the quality most esteemed by liberal humanism or the scientific posthuman, the “universal instrument” of Cartesian reason (Badmington 5); rather, it is an embodied affectivity. While this affectivity makes the still-human (or, still somewhat-human) characters vulnerable to manipulation, suffering, and possible
extinction, it is also the one quality that allows them to overcome those who threaten to extinguish and replace the human.

Such narratives react against a techno-posthuman world in which the key components of the human—body and mind—are viewed as inherently flawed, with science as the rescuer of the human from its mortal self. In this world, the human becomes an assemblage of parts, conceived of in terms of a machine that can be fully understood, operated, repaired, and redesigned. Richard Dawkins exudes the delight of scientists that what used to be described even in scientific discourse as the “irreducible mysterious essence of life” has been replaced: “we’ve become wholly mechanistic when talking about life,” a situation he calls “most thrilling and exciting” (“Interview”). The “mysterious essence” is now a machine. Furthermore, for each “part” of this machine science establishes an ideal operating standard that, in a myriad of ways, an individual part can fail to meet. The role of science is to correct this failure, a failure that increasingly is viewed as resulting from genetic flaws, biological error. What has traditionally been accepted as “normal” or inevitable—shortsightedness, obesity, age-related illness, cancer, a tendency to addiction, or the inability of a boy to sit still and focus—is pathologized and offered up to science as yet another opportunity to perfect the species. In this scenario, science deems the human an unfinished and inherently malfunctioning organism, or clockwork, a view resisted in certain imaginative depictions of a posthuman world, in which an all too human vulnerability defies science and is endowed with redemptive and even salvific qualities, even while it is shown to be weak.

In the new incarnation of Battlestar Galactica (a very different creature than the on-the-verge-of-camp series from the late 1970s), the distinction between the humans and the scientifically produced Cylons is most evident in the Cylons’ physical, psychological, and cultural supremacy, which appears to make them nearly invulnerable. The humans of the series are the descendants of a people whose scientific prowess allowed them to produce the Cylons who, over time, evolved to become their peers and even superiors, sharing more with the gods the humans worship than with the humans themselves. The Cylons were originally created as robotic soldiers: shiny silver killing machines, towering overhead with a single “eye” that continuously scans the environment, seeking only humans to kill. The Cylons were programmed so effectively that they evolved at a
much more rapid pace than did their creators, such that each of the qualities they were endowed with developed to an extreme the humans neither intended nor anticipated. In the process, the most evolved Cylons become humanoid, with a biology and psychology that mimic people so closely that only a complex computer test can distinguish the humans from their products. These Cylon bodies and minds, however, lack many of the weaknesses of their producers’ bodies and minds, for their “bodies” can be replaced through reincarnation (a kind of material replication) and their “minds,” which are conversant with computers, are unimpeded by a mortal body. The Cylons even become culturally independent, to the point of developing a strong evangelical monotheism that motivates their encounters with the humans. The narrative paints the humans as less evolved not only in their relative physical fragility but also in their apparently inferior cultural structures: they are nearly tribal in their polytheistic religious expression, their supposedly universal morality is relative and self-centered, and their application of their judicial system is repeatedly shown to be hypocritical and cynical.

And yet the human is so precious that the central concern of the series is the survival of the species in the face of repeated Cylon attacks. Human nature is so esteemed by the narrative, in fact, that Cylon evolution is, in the current third season of the series, in the process of producing what appears to be a hybrid of the humans who created them and the inhuman machines the Cylons originally were. These humanoid Cylons have certain significant limitations, physical (they are susceptible to viruses) and emotional (they love, and they have even betrayed their own kind for this love). While the first generation of Cylon was all machine, and the second human in appearance, the newest species is experiencing life as humans, which is to say, biologically and affectively. Their evolution seems to be taking them to a hybrid post-machinity, with the potential that they will ultimately become human, affirming human nature as the most desirable possible form, despite its many imperfections.

*Battlestar Galactica* attempts to identify the most salient features of humanity by exploring changes experienced by a posthuman other as it becomes human. Other narratives trace similar features through the changes humans might experience when taking on extra-human features. The 1998 film *Dark City* focuses on the Strangers, a frightening alien race “as old as time itself” that looks nearly human (in Gothic-Victorian attire,
with a mix of 1950s Martian). They are not posthuman in the way the Cylons of *Battlestar Galactica* are (though their mechanical humanoid form evokes the post-apocalyptic posthuman), for they are not the products of human techno-science, but of some alien evolution in a distant world. The human protagonist, John Murdoch, unknowingly becomes a hybrid posthuman as a result of the Strangers’ experimentation on him—an experimentation they are conducting in order to preserve themselves from extinction. Despite their enviable ability to “alter physical reality by will alone,” as the human doctor-narrator explains, “they were dying, their civilization was in decline, and so they abandoned their world, seeking a cure for their own mortality.” They seek this cure in the form of the human soul—the necessary component they somehow recognize they lack—by performing experiments on unsuspecting humans they have transported to a wholly fabricated world, the Dark City, whose landscape the Strangers control by collectively focusing their telekinetic energies on machines they have installed deep underground. They then treat each person as a “blank slate” and physically inject a series of memories into his or her mind (via a syringe to the brain), completely unbeknownst to the subject of the experiment. As the doctor-narrator explains, the Strangers are “trying to divine what makes us unique.” They do this by changing all aspects of an individual’s identity—personal history, family, job, social status, etc.—to see what remains constant. As Mr. Hand, leader of the Strangers, explains at the moment of his own death, the Strangers “fashioned this city on stolen memories. Different eras, different pasts, all rolled into one. Each night we revise it, refine it, in order to learn . . . about you and your fellow inhabitants, what makes you human.” The Strangers seek a constant essence they assume is humans’ defining characteristic.

The usual focus of Enlightenment humanism on the mind’s capacity for reason is replaced in this narrative with the soul’s capacity for emotion. Human behavior is depicted as naturally and inevitably rooted in feeling, which the film shows to be the key characteristic of the soul, as represented via Murdoch’s hybrid posthumanity. Murdoch’s identity is the result of an interrupted experiment that gave him the powers of the Strangers without removing his human identity: his particular individuality was lost, but his human nature was not replaced by Stranger nature. Like the Cylons, he is a case of science gone awry, yet (like the evolving Cylons themselves) his victimhood allows him a productively hybrid
posthumanity: because the experiment was interrupted, he can manipulate the physical world at will while also retaining his soul, as is exhibited through his capacity to love irrationally and to risk himself for the sake of his fellow humans, present and future. As a result, he is what the Strangers were trying to become. Unlike them, however, he understands the importance of making seemingly irrational yet principled choices, as is revealed through his decision love his wife, Emma, despite his discovery that the entire relationship was artificially constructed by the Strangers through false memories injected into Emma and himself. It is not simply a matter of Murdoch’s having achieved the Strangers’ “superhuman” skills that makes him capable of fighting them; it is the combination of those skills with his emotional orientations.

Murdoch confirms the narrative’s investment in affect as the vital human capacity that the Strangers seek, in the form of the soul, although the Strangers fail to recognize it as such. In his final confrontation with Mr. Hand, who explains, “Your imprint is not agreeable with my kind. But I wanted to know what it was like. How you feel,” Murdoch responds, “You wanted to know what it was about us that made us human. But you’re not going to find it here [pointing to his head]. You were looking in the wrong place.” His belief in love, which will not guarantee his survival—deliberately and knowingly choosing a pseudo-love over reason—produces his humanity. The movie’s classic romance conclusion, with the hero and heroine reunited and starting their life together (albeit in a constructed landscape) shows that love, regardless of the lack of authenticity of their memories and geography, makes them human. The Strangers cannot develop this capacity, not because they are not hardwired as humans but because they think the soul is a tangible quality of the mind rather than, as Murdoch explains and demonstrates, an intangible quality of the heart, which, technically speaking, is a human fiction.

The film appears to imply that, unlike Murdoch, scientists have a tendency to devalue and deny the affective capacities that produce their very humanity. The Strangers reveal themselves to be operating not only from a liberal humanist worldview, in which an unchanging human nature directs behavior, but also from a techno-scientific perspective in which that human nature can be investigated and understood by taking it apart. The film confirms the first of these assumptions (there is something so universally essential to human nature that it cannot be eradicated by science), but
challenges the last in that there is something opaque about an essential human nature that cannot be seen as a “moving part,” nor mechanized. The film depicts the Strangers as artists, through the fictional tableaux they make for the characters they have so carefully constructed, yet they are incapable of learning from, or appropriately valuing, their art. They have faith only in science, and that prevents them from developing or imagining for themselves a soul. The human doctor shares this limitation: he is physiologically human, yet unlike Murdoch he uses his intellect alone (which allows him to collude with the Strangers despite their obviously evil aims). An image of the doctor performing experiments on a rat in a large maze makes a direct equation between the Strangers and today’s scientists: both seek scientific “answers” that will preserve them from decay and destruction and do so through controlled (and cruel) experimentation on living subjects. Both represent liberal humanism’s esteemed rationality, while also revealing techno-science’s insufficient ability to feel.

The hybrid posthuman represented in both Battlestar Galactica and Dark City is one that serves not to support a “new ontological state” but to highlight what the texts argue are centrally intractable human qualities, just as medieval werewolf stories did. Dark City expresses, moreover, a resistance to science’s distrust of the intangible, that which cannot (currently, at least) be understood, explained, and manipulated by science. Richard Dawkins describes religion, for instance, as a “by-product” of a “psychological disposition” in humans—more specifically, what he calls a “psychological weakness”—toward “believ[ing] things that they would like to be true even if there is no evidence for them” (“Interview”). Dark City and Battlestar Galactica confirms that this tendency is a disposition among human beings, but one that despite its capacity for making them gullible is also the one quality that truly sets them apart, individually and collectively, and provides value in their lives, no matter how vulnerable those lives might be as a result.

Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2006 novel Never Let Me Go, set in the late twentieth century, is narrated by a clone named Kathy whose body was scientifically produced as a site for growing organs to be “harvested” for the preservation of “normal” humans threatened by disease or other physical trauma. The narrative traces the psychological development of three young clones in particular who form a lasting friendship: Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth. They are raised and live together at Halisham, a boarding school (which is
a type of orphanage), where they grapple with the great divide between their understanding of themselves as humans and their society’s consideration of them as non-humans—as mere bodies lacking deep interior selves or souls, artificial products of a human science whose sole purpose is to extend the lives of “genuine” humans. The clones are ultimately constrained by a system which demands that they contribute their bodies (which involves certain death, or “completion,” as it is called), as their major organs are “donated” one by one in a sequence organized to delay their death for maximum harvesting opportunities. Moreover, they are expected to donate their living services as well: most clones spend at least some time serving as “carers,” or caretakers, to other clones whose organs are being surgically removed. Both the humans and the clones they produce participate in an oppressive posthumanity: the clones (against their will) as the techno-scientific posthuman product, and the humans, willfully, through their acceptance that their own existence depends upon and justifies this system of the enforced service (and deaths) of others.

Both groups claim humanity, but only those who were not “artificially” produced are free to do as they choose. By focusing the novel on the experiences and feelings of the clones—represented through Kathy’s narration of her memories and experiences, especially with her closest friends, Ruth and Tommy—Ishiguro makes clear that their identity is no different from that of the humans who created them, or those of us who are reading their story; they are concerned with competition (Ruth continually manipulates Kathy to test her loyalty), sex (Kathy anxiously tries to prove that her great interest in sex, which she perceives as unusual and undesirable in a woman, is an inherited predisposition), and the quest for an individual identity (Tommy struggles throughout his time at the school against his reputation for lacking artistic skill and is the favorite target of bullies). Their experiences are wholly indistinguishable from those presented by any modern narrative about children growing up in an institutional setting, discovering life for themselves, based loosely on what they are told (or, in many cases, allowed to believe) by the few adults who chaperone and educate them. Kathy, like the narrators in many of Ishiguro’s novel, reveals a tendency to self-delusion as a coping mechanism. In fact, this quality is exhibited by all of the asexually produced characters, who develop a variety of stories to explain their experiences and observations and to give themselves the hope they need in order to survive the dehumanizing world
into which they have been thrust but about which they have only ever been given half-truths.

A key myth develops for the students as they approach the end of their education, which is followed by a short transitional period as they prepare to start their time as “donors,” that is to say, as they approach their death. Their desire to live, one of the many topics they silently place out of bounds in order to be able to carry on, takes the form of a belief in the possibility of a deferment for those who can “prove” that they are in love. This myth piggybacks on a myth that sustained them in their earlier childhood, when they were told that they could demonstrate their uniqueness through their artwork, their “creativity,” as it is repeatedly called. The young clones believe that their artwork is selected and collected by the school’s regional director, Madame, based on its aesthetic value, and placed in a special public gallery. As they age, they come to believe (in stereotypical struggling teenage fashion) that love will literally rescue them, and that if their love can be deemed “true” by the artwork they have produced throughout their lives that reveals their individual and “true” identities, they can be saved. They believe (though they can never articulate this openly) that their love and creativity, their ability to emote authentically, will confirm their humanity and thus preserve them from the inhumane death that is otherwise their fate. Kathy even dreams of one day being a mother. Indeed, it is revealed later that the teachers collected the best artwork in order to prove to those outside the school that clones have souls and thus should be treated with more equity, but the ultimate result of their efforts is that Halisham is shut down. Ruth dies, followed by Tommy, and the novel ends with Kathy still alive, but resigned to the fact that she will die soon.

For the reader, the clones’ experiences and responses to those experiences regularly confirm their humanity, but within the posthuman world of the narrative, their humanity must be proven. For the clones—as they believed it is for the supposedly more “real” humans—to be human is to have an interior self that is able to express what it feels, and that feels love in particular. The clones who are the central figures of the novel are shown, through the narrative, to meet that requirement as fully as any humans. However, the more “real” and biologically enhanced humans are revealed to be lacking in the humanity expressed in so many ways by their scientific offspring. They, not the clones, are the nightmare posthumans
here, not because of their bioenhancements but because through their attempt to extend their own lives, they have inhumanely destroyed the lives of others purely for their own benefit and in order to sustain that, they must refuse to risk an affectivity that would allow them to feel for the clones. When Kathy and Tommy initially approach Madame to request a deferment, they eagerly announce that they are “in love,” to which her response (in a tone Kathy describes as “almost sarcastic”) is to ask, “You believe this?” and “How can you know it? You think love is so simple?” (253). She is shocked to learn that they believe in these old values, ones that she has sacrificed in order to benefit—to extend her now inhumane selfhood—from the biological possibilities offered by techno-science. This is not to say Madame does not regret her choices, as the situation of the clones over whom she keeps watch often distresses her. Kathy, Ruth, Tommy, and the other clones, however, make a more selfless sacrifice, having been “brought up to serve humanity in the most astonishing and selfless ways, and the humanity they achieve in so doing makes us realize that in a new world the word must be redefined” (Yardley). Once again, being human is revealed as a certain feeling vulnerability and ability to love others, even in the face of one’s own inevitable and untimely death; to be otherwise is to have moved beyond “being human.”

Dark City, Battlestar Galactica, and Never Let Me Go engage current fantasies about science producing a posthuman world in which disease, frailty, and aging are the exception rather than the rule. Yet these narratives qualify that desire by retaining a nostalgia for the weaknesses that result from particular embodied affectivities, representing these characteristics as what ultimately separates a hybrid posthuman—and thus the human—from the alternatives. The texts promote an alternative to the techno-scientific quest for perfection that interprets every presumed weakness as a problem in need of repair. Science is represented as so certain of its own objectivity and reason that all kinds of atrocities are possible. In both Dark City and Never Let Me Go, medical scientists are purely selfish antagonists in their single-minded reliance on “objective” reason, while the hybrid and posthuman protagonists exemplify the “best” or more virtuous qualities traditionally associated with “human nature,” ones rooted in emotion and in aesthetic expression. Indeed, the human must move through and beyond reason to reach the hybrid posthumanity within which what has always been human can best express itself. John Murdoch—like
Margery Kempe—locates his humanness on the other side of a body and mind transformation, occasioned by an illness-produced irrationality: Murdoch is emotionally diseased (seeking out the doctor initially because of his anger over his real wife’s affair), as Kempe experienced a loss of reason as a consequence of childbirth. Central human experiences such as love and childbirth produce supposedly irrational feelings and altered states of being, shown to be as fundamentally human as reason. A certain, inherently flawed human embodiment necessitates affectivity, which is seen as essential to human experience and understanding—more particularly, to humane modes of expression and understanding—in a way reason is not. The hybrid posthuman in its premodern and contemporary manifestations, for all of its “out of body” and altered states, remains rooted in a feeling human vulnerability.

In a culture in which human vulnerability—to pain, to supposedly aberrant emotional states, to aging, and even to death—is a state of affairs to be eradicated, science may not intend to reduce the self by conceptualizing it as a machine that is only a sum of its parts, but what these contemporary posthuman narratives argue is that a reduction of the human person’s capacity for self-determination, and even happiness, is the inevitable effect of the realization of such a view. The posthuman that results from such a realization, these narratives imply, may be physically enriched, its capabilities and life extended, but in the process much of its identity and value as a singular work of human art—cognitive, biological, emotional—is lost. John Murdoch in *Dark City* and the Cylons of *Battlestar Galactica* are physically more adept and powerful because of technology. And yet what makes Murdoch still human is his willingness to act extra-reasonably, to sacrifice himself for the good of “humanity” simply out of a belief, which can never be proven by a piling up evidence that would satisfy the scientific method, in the value of the vulnerable and frail human who would choose love over his own survival. Similarly, the biologically enhanced human beings in *Never Let Me Go* have made posthumans of themselves, and have thereby engaged in a devolution in which they retain their (more durable) human bodies but sacrifice their human nature, as represented by their lack of faith in love and hope and their cruel treatment of the clones who they refuse to view as fully human. But the clones are, in fact, more human than Madame and the other guardians because of their belief that they might have a future, despite all the evi-
dence to the contrary. These narratives ultimately support the sociologist Bryan Turner’s belief that “[i]f the promise of modernity were ever to prove successful, it would reduce our vulnerability, and thus bring about the end of humanity” (32).

Indeed, without vulnerability, a society of extremely rational beings experiencing no loss to decay or disease would find little need to express their experiences, their individual selfhood, through art. Art—in the form of stories, especially—is used in these texts to fashion identities for the hybrid posthuman, providing hope for the clones in *Never Let Me Go* and producing the whole basis for John Murdoch’s life in *Dark City*. The stories are completely untrue, yet they are necessary to survival. Both novel and film demonstrate that art is necessary to human expression and self-understanding, especially in the midst of a culture in which the greatest demonstration of humanness—of human superiority—is assumed to be scientific, rather than artistic. Through science, it is suggested, we can create ourselves as we wish to exist, and can do so in the material world rather than in the imaginary world of art. Yet art, these narratives argue, is where the always intangible yet most valuable aspects of individual existence can best be expressed, interrogated, and celebrated. Indeed, identity does not seem possible without stories—stories, moreover, that are grounded in an emotional life that cannot be quantitatively measured. In a song released in 2007, Isaac Brock of the band Modest Mouse takes on the persona of a scientifically produced individual and groans that he was “born in a factory, far away from the milky teat” and indicts his audience for “cheer[ing] as I was split in half, a mechanical sacrificial calf for you.” The song’s refrain is the question driving this posthuman’s lament, the central question to which contemporary posthuman texts also respond: “What’s the use? Oh, what’s the use?” Medieval Christians found “the use” in their hybrid relationship with Christ, who was both “divine” (i.e., perfect) and also human (i.e., feelingly and bodily vulnerable); contemporary persons, the science fiction dystopic narratives argue, can find it in their flawed affectivity, even when it is “joined,” perhaps more so, to their posthuman “bodies.”

Certain popular texts, both medieval and contemporary, intriguingly encourage what could be seen as a counter-intuitive hope for the posthuman, one which embraces the “weakness” of human beings to “believe things that they would like to be true even if there is no evidence for
them” (Dawkins). Margery (and the medieval theologians whose views she pursued to the heretical fullest), Murdoch (and his “wife” Emma, who accepts his experientially unfounded love), the evolved Cylons (who act, against “type,” in accord with their emotional attachments), and Kathy and her clone friends all value “the human” that their respective cultures have supposedly left behind so intensely that their posthuman situatedness does not prevent them from expressing, often with a kind of tenacious despair, what they believe to be their own singular, human identities. Like the medieval posthuman characterized by Christ, whose assumption of human nature required an acceptance of the frailties associated with (but not limited to) the human body, the contemporary posthuman defends the beauty of the singular human by deliberately retaining, within its machinery or altered physical state, the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that result from the memories of its old, historical body, and hence, its all too affected and affective self.

Notes

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1. Soper and Davies provide thorough and useful histories of the development of various strains of humanism, including its Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment manifestations. Badmington offers an overview of posthumanism, which he generally defines as “a refusal to take humanism for granted” (10), in a collection of essays that includes key foundational posthumanist texts by thinkers such as Barthes, Foucault, Fanon, and Althusser, among others. Posthumanism, like humanism, tends to be understood as a term that refers not to a single concept but to a cluster of related concepts, and the books by Soper, Davies, and Badmington demonstrate this. Hayles, Halberstam, and Haraway view the posthuman with some optimism, in ways that challenge many traditional humanist values.
2. In fact, the danger has been so broadly recognized as to generate the so-called “Crisis in the Humanities.” Perloff, former president of the MLA, wrote an article in 2001 titled simply “Crisis in the Humanities,” and the influence of the conceptual posthuman informs the title (and project) of Scholes’s 2004 Presidential Address to the MLA, “The Humanities in a Posthumanist World.” Soper and Davies have most strongly influenced my own thinking on the issue; particularly encouraging are their contributions to the development of a “new” humanism informed by poststructuralist critique and responsive to the challenges posed to humanism, post-Enlightenment and otherwise, by the transition to a posthuman world.

3. For an overview of the posthumanist critique of the liberal humanist subject, in the sciences as well as in the literary and other arts, see especially Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* and Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human*.

4. The popular media makes much of techno-science’s imaginative potential. To take a randomly selected example, the cover of the May 2007 issue of the magazine *Discover: Science, Technology, and The Future* included eight headlines, half of which played up this feature: “The Plastic Brain: Keeping The Mind Forever Young”; “Morality Hardwired: Is Right And Wrong In Our DNA?”; “Mind-Controlled Robots”; and “Suspended Animation: How 10 Minutes in Limbo Can Save Your Life.”


6. Bynum demonstrates through an extensive analysis of Gerald’s various versions of the story that his interpretation of the story’s significance, which depends upon a problematic analogue of Christ’s incarnation, actually reveals his own ambivalence toward the werewolves’ moral and human status (2001, 16–18).

7. The Middle English *William of Palerne* (based on a thirteenth-century French verse romance) can be found in the 1867 Skeat edition. An electronic edition by Gerrit H.V. Bunt was published in 2002 by the University of Michigan Press. Marie’s *Bisclavret* is one of her twelve *lais* (short Breton romances written in Old French poetic verse) and can be read in English translation in the edition by Hanning and Ferrante.
8. For instance, medieval theologians actively resisted a range of heresies that were declared such in large part because of their perceived “assault not just on pious practice but on fundamental notions of the human” through “denying the boundaries of things—for preaching metempsychosis or a deification in which person was lost in divinity” (Bynum 2001, 27). Bynum writes that we can “see such resistance in the thirteenth-century Church’s rejection both of metempsychosis and of antinomian or quietist teachings that the individual can become God” (2001, 32).

9. Mind uploading, also known as mind transfer or electronic transcendence, is the movement or relocation of the human mind to a hardware system (other than the human body) that is considered by Moravec, Kurzweil, and others to be the mind’s optimum condition, in which cognition is fully released from its “wet” and imperfect body; such views tend to envision an evolved state in which the human as we know it is replaced by a new age of machines/robots. See, for example, Moravec’s *Mind Children* and Kurzweil’s *The Singularity is Near*.

10. In Book 22, Chapter 21 of his *City of God*, Augustine wrote, “But even if by some grave misfortune or the savagery of enemies the whole [body] should be completely ground to dust and dispersed into the air or water, so that as far as it is possible, it has no being at all, by no means is it able to be beyond the omnipotence of the Creator, but not a hair of its head shall perish. Therefore, the spiritual flesh will be subjected to the spirit, yet nevertheless [will still be] flesh, not spirit; just as the carnal spirit was subjected to the flesh, yet will still be spirit, not flesh” (*De civitate dei* 48:841; my translation).

11. The concern in the Middle Ages was with retaining the body—in all its imperfect parts—whereas in the contemporary posthuman fantasy the concern is often to escape the body entirely, either by literally “getting out” or by making the body so close to perfect that it is an able and enduring assistant to the mind.

12. On the idea, again, that “mind” could be separated from “brain” (i.e., “body”) and uploaded to a computer database, without an interruption in the experience of self-identity, see Moravec and Kurzweil.

13. More recently, scientists have been turning to work on the emotions. See especially Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*, *The Feeling of What Happens*, and *Looking for Spinoza*.

14. Such a scenario is common among apocalyptic posthuman narratives, such as the *Matrix* film trilogy, in which the humans create the very Artificial Intelligence that eventually seizes power and enslaves human bodies as energy sources, keeping the human brain distracted by engaging it in a virtual world, the Matrix.
15. Some key differences between the current incarnation of *Battlestar Galactica* and its precursor demonstrate a shift in interests on the part of those imaginatively investigating the posthuman world. In the 1978-79 television series (and its brief follow-up series in 1980), the Cylons are a reptilian alien race that produces a military robot that, it is implied, overtook its creator. In the current version, the Cylons are a product of the humans themselves, and the narrative traces the humans’ vexed relationship with their own creation.

**Works Cited**


Mourning Rights: Beowulf, the Iliad, and the War in Iraq

Robin Norris

The Iliad speaks to the way we think about war, because the one impulse that has proved as enduring as human beings’ urge to make wars is their need to make sense of them. The first step in making sense of any such loss is to mourn the dead. Nothing is more crucial to approaching Homer and the arts that come from war than thinking back on loss. Bereavement and mourning are things we come to know firsthand in life, sooner or later. Perhaps we learn them most efficiently through war. The Iliad has death and mourning in abundance, and the poetry it offers is the only enduring consolation. Homer finds significance in his war, as later poets would in theirs, by moving from the present moment to other points in time, juxtaposing the here and now with the past and future.

—James Tatum, The Mourner’s Song (xi)

Much is at stake in the afterlife of literature. Through its episodic focus on individual experience, heroic poetry gives us a means to process the magnitude of the loss of human life entailed in war. In an attempt to explain the world’s failure to respond to contemporary genocide, Paul Slovic has recently demonstrated that the average person feels the greatest affect—and is therefore most likely to act—in response to the experience of one individual in crisis. Not only do we cease to feel when presented with the

suffering of thousands; our affective response to just two individuals is markedly lower than the response to one. We honor the individual, but we are incapable of maintaining the same respect for the plurality. Likewise, we may not mourn for the countless Greek soldiers buried in a mass grave on the shore near Troy, but we grieve with Achilles for Patroclus, and with Priam for Hector; we may not mourn for the extinction of the Geatish nation, but we grieve with the meowle, the “woman” who bemoans her fate at Beowulf’s pyre.

Although Homo sapiens may not be the only species to experience or express bereavement, and we are certainly not the only species whose loss deserves to be mourned, we seem to be the only ones writing poems of remembrance for one another. Thus, while I have not met Patroclus or the Geatish meowle, the poetry of Homer and the Beowulf-poet has invited me to remember them, and to participate in the shared community of mourners at epic’s end. Transmitting sorrow through the technology of poetry is an experience unique to human beings, to being human, and reading such texts subjects us to a contagious mourning that allows us to weep for individuals we’ve never met, and who may have never even existed. If the study of the humanities can provoke an affective response to the plight of individuals long dead, even fictional ones, then perhaps the humanities will someday teach us to respond more fully to the real suffering of our contemporaries, the victims of force, of war, or genocide.

**Mourning Past and Future**

In The Iliad or the Poem of Force, Simone Weil defines ‘force’ as “that which makes a thing of whoever submits to it” (45). “Exercised to the extreme,” she explains, “it makes the human being a thing quite literally, that is, a dead body” (45). Mourning for death, the conversion of human into thing, takes place through remembrance of the past, by recalling the time when the thing was still a human. In his famous essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud explains the importance of memory to the work of mourning when he writes, “Each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object is brought up and hypercathected” in order to attenuate emotional attachment to the dearly departed (244). Thus, mourning is a natural process that requires a temporary focus on the past. A diagnosis of melancholy may apply to those whose attachment to
the past has become permanent, and therefore pathological, as Julia Kristeva explains:

Riveted to the past, regressing to the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience, melancholy persons manifest a strange memory: everything has gone by, they seem to say, but I am faithful to those bygone days, I am nailed down to them, no revolution is possible, there is no future . . . An overinflated, hyperbolic past fills all the dimensions of the psychic continuity. (60)

In short, the healthy result of the grieving process is to decathect these memories of the past in order to return to life in the present, and to life without the human person who has been lost. For many mourners, therefore, we would expect the grieving process, which takes communal form through the funerary ritual, to require remembering the past. Through remembrance, Weil’s thing continues to be remembered by humans as human, through the only afterlife we may be guaranteed: the one we humans create for our own.

Weil argues further that, as a result of his relationship to force, the warrior develops an unnatural experience of the future: “It is true that every man is destined to die and that a soldier may grow old in battles, but for those whose soul is bent beneath the yoke of war, the connection between death and the future is not the same as for other men. For others, death is a limit imposed on the future. For soldiers, it is the future itself, the future their vocation allots” (58).

The afterlife of reputation is therefore of particular interest to a warrior, for if his death in war is certain, the only possible outcome is posthumous, whether glory or obsolescence. In this community, those who face death together in battle also shepherd one another into the afterlife. Thus, what we often find in heroic literature, in texts including both the Iliad and Beowulf, is the warrior mourned by his fellow warriors through remembrance of the past.¹

The funeral of Beowulf himself provides an interesting case study, as it is an event populated by numerous mourning warriors who have largely been ignored by Anglo-Saxonists. As his last wish, Beowulf tells Wiglaf:
Bid those renowned in battle to build a bright mound at the sea’s cape after the pyre; it will tower high on Hronesness as a memorial to my people, so that afterwards seafarers will call it Beowulf’s barrow. (2802–7a)²

Not only does Beowulf wish to be remembered, but it is the headomære, “those renowned in battle,” whom he wishes to conduct his funeral. Of course, cremation of a body in this manner took no small amount of effort.³ Then, during the ten-day period following Beowulf’s cremation, the Geats construct Beowulf’s barrow, per his own request, as a memorial to him. In fact, a second, final ceremony is held at least ten days after the initial funeral in seventy-five per cent of cultures; this two-stage model helps to structure the mourning process by setting a time limit on the grieving period, to encourage mourners to return to life in the present (Rosenblatt 92).

After the mound is constructed, twelve warriors ride around the barrow and share memories of their fallen lord:

Then the battle-brave children of nobles, twelve in all, rode around the mound. They wished to bewail their care and bemoan their king, recite elegies and talk about the man; they praised his lordship and his great deeds, appraised his manhood—as it is fitting that one praise his lord with words, love him in his heart when he must be led forth from his body. Thus did the Geatish people, the hearth-companions, mourn the fall of their lord. (3169–79)⁴

By building the barrow, these men have created a lasting memorial to Beowulf, which also becomes their focal point for shared reminiscence of the dead man and his great deeds. Not only do they feel sorrow, but they wish to speak about these feelings and to praise their beloved lord. Furthermore, the narrator himself validates this behavior as the proper way for a leader to be mourned.

From a contrary perspective, a further acknowledgement of the gravity of the grieving process for Anglo-Saxon warriors is the disruption of an enemy’s funeral as an extreme and effective sign of disrespect. Perhaps the most famous example in Old English literature is the Vikings’ theft of
King Edmund’s head, explicitly so that it would be not buried. This strategy accomplished the intended effect, for Edmund’s followers “became very sad at heart over his murder, and indeed that they did not have the head for that body.” Similar monstrous behavior is described by Beowulf upon his return to Geatland, when he explains to Hygelac that Grendel’s mother took Æschere’s corpse in order to deprive Hrothgar of the chance to mourn for his dearest companion:

After morning came, the Danish people could not cremate the death-weary one with burning, nor lay the dear man on the fire; she took that body away in an enemy’s embrace under the waterfall. To Hrothgar that was the most bitter of the sorrows that had long befallen the people’s prince. (2124–30)

Nor are the Geats themselves above depriving an enemy of a proper burial. Hence, the dragon is unceremoniously shoved off the cliff to make way, both in the narrative and logistically, for the building of Beowulf’s barrow.

In the world of the Iliad, funeral interruption is the ultimate insult to one’s enemy. As he faces off with Achilles for the last time, awareness of this possibility leads Hector to swear, “I will give your body back to your loyal comrades. Swear you’ll do the same” (22.306–7). Yet Achilles refuses, citing the seemingly insurmountable difference between Greek and Trojan: “There are no binding oaths between men and lions—wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds—they are all bent on hating each other to the death” (22.310–12). Instead, Achilles ignores death’s influence as the great leveler, and he desecrates Hector’s corpse, both at the end of Book 22, and, ironically, during the funeral games for Patroclus conducted with such care in Book 23, “fl[inging] him facedown in the dust beside Patroclus’ bier” (23.29). To reclaim Hector’s body, his father Priam risks his own life to sneak into Achilles’ camp, where he clasps the knees of his son’s killer, and kisses his hands, saying, “Remember your own father, great godlike Achilles—as old as I am, past the threshold of deadly old age!” (24.570–71). Reminding Achilles of the elderly man back home hoping in vain for his son’s return becomes an effective strategy, for the narrator tells us that
Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire to grieve for his own father. And overpowered by memory both men gave way to grief. Priam wept freely for man-killing Hector, throbbing, crouching before Achilles’ feet, as Achilles wept himself, now for his father, now for Patroclus once again, and their sobbing rose and fell throughout the house. (24.592–99)

It is the shared experience of grief through memory of the past that brings Achilles and Priam together, and leads Achilles not only to return the body of his enemy, but to promise that the Greeks will “hold our attack as long as you require” (24.788), so that the epic may conclude, “And so the Trojans buried Hector breaker of horses” (24.944).

Yet while death is a universal human experience, not all the dead share the hero’s fate. Weil describes a second category of “still more miserable beings who, without dying, have become things for life” (48). These other victims of force do not immediately become dead bodies, but instead are enslaved, exiled, and dispossessed, subject to phenomena today acknowledged as abuses of human rights. Weil asserts the thing-status of these beings when she writes:

These are not men living harder lives than others, or socially inferior to others; they are an alternative human species, a hybrid of man and corpse. This thing aspires at all times to be a man or a woman, and never attains this goal. This is a death that extends throughout a life, a life that death has frozen long before putting an end to it. (49)

Weil’s second conversion of human to thing, this “death that extends throughout a life,” must also be mourned. In fact, mourning is itself a human right, as evidenced by the fact that only those categorized as humans are subject to it; moreover, what we would now consider to be human rights abuses often go hand in hand with the denial of this right for those ‘things’ buried in mass graves, unidentified human remains, and the disappeared. Although the physical death of an entity viewed as thing will not be grieved nor remembered by a community, nonetheless, in heroic literature, the dispossessed often assert their human right to be mourned. Of
course, heroic literature preserves the memory of the great deeds of heroes, those more fortunate victims of force. But within these texts, space is also maintained for memory of the dispossessed, who have no choice but to preemptively mourn for their own future.

Although all the Geatish people are subject to extinction following the death of their leader, not all will die in battle, the outcome we may predict for the hearth-companions who ride around Beowulf’s barrow. In contrast, the voice of the disempowered Geats is represented by a female civilian:

Likewise, the old woman, sorrowful, with her hair bound up, sang a mournful song for Beowulf, said repeatedly that she sorely feared for herself evil days, a great number of slaughters, terror for a warrior, humiliation and captivity. (3150–55a)

Introduced with *swylce*, this portrait occurs within the context of others (aristocratic, warrior men) grieving at the funeral pyre. Tauno Mustanoja has read this unnamed woman’s speech as a spontaneous outburst of personal emotion, yet it is remarkable that the content of her speech is not grief *per se* but a prophecy of doom (15). What this woman adds to her male companions’ mourning process is not so much personal emotion as a critique of the failure of heroic society, specifically, the evil, slaughter, terror, humiliation, and captivity awaiting herself and her people in the near future. As if symbolically, this folio of the manuscript has suffered great physical damage, and requires editorial reconstruction to be read.10 Helen Bennett has charged these editors as “patriarchal scholars” who “insert their own inverted reflection to fulfill the supposed desire of the text while confirming their own ideologies,” thus recreating the woman in their own image (35). Thus, it may not be *æfter Biowulfe*, “on account of Beowulf,” that she sings her *giomorgyd*, “sorrowful song,” but rather, this woman speaks for herself.

Nor is this *Geatisc meowle* left to suffer alone, for Beowulf’s death will cause sorrow for every Geat in a world that binds his people tightly to their leader’s fate. In the announcement of Beowulf’s death to his people, the messenger states:

Not at all will a nobleman wear treasures in remembrance, nor a beautiful woman have a necklace on her neck, but sad
of mind, deprived of gold, she must not once but often
tread a foreign country, now that the lord has laid aside
laughter, joy, and mirth. (3015b–21a)

Here, the eorl, a nobleman and warrior, will be deprived of an opportunity
to remember the past, though he may yet die in battle himself. On the
other hand, a future of dispossession and exile is forecast for his female
counterpart, to whom the warrior role is unavailable. Though the effects of
their leader’s death for both eorl, “nobleman,” and mægð, “woman,” are
mentioned here, editor Friedrich Klaeber’s note to line 3018ff. points us
specifically to a civilian figure in Book 24 of the Iliad, the “lamentation of
Andromache” (225).

Klaeber is not incorrect to acknowledge the similar effects of force that
appear in a text from a warrior culture in another time and place. Indeed,
the meowle’s reaction to Beowulf’s death does resonate with Andromache’s grim view of the future once her husband Hector has died in
Book 22 of the Iliad. According to Fagles’ translation, Andromache is left
a widow, worried for her infant son, that “pain and labor will plague him
all his days to come” (22.574). This prediction recalls the couple’s conversa-
tion in Book 6, when Hector states that he would rather die than hear his
wife dragged away into slavery (6.539–55), and looks forward to Book 24,
when Andromache acknowledges that she will be “carried off in the hol-
low ships” (24.861), and the orphaned Astyanax will be enslaved, or flung
from the ramparts by an Achaeian marauder, as vengeance for his father’s
deeds (24.862–69). With the protectors of their people dead, both Andro-
mache and the meowle can indeed expect “hard days ahead, / the times of
slaughter, the host’s terror, / harm and captivity” (Liuzza 3153b–55a). Un-
like the well-executed funeral of Beowulf, however, the body of Andro-
mache’s husband is seized by his murderer, Achilles, to deprive the Tro-
jans of the satisfaction of mourning over Hector.

In “The Poetics of Loss in Greek Epic,” Sheila Murnaghan has ana-
lyzed the problematic yet constitutive relationship of lamentation and epic
in the works of Homer. As Murnaghan explains, “As a grieving response
to the loss of an individual, lamentation is an urgent expression of that per-
son’s value, and so is a form of praise. Lament is thus prototypical of epic
as a genre that confers praise—kleos in Homeric epic—on the actions of
heroes, and more particularly on the actions of dead heroes, who have
earned their right to be praised through the manner of their deaths” (204). At the same time, however, lamentation threatens to undermine this goal because “it stresses the suffering caused by heroic death rather than the glory won by it” (204). Yet for Simone Weil, both dead heroes and those who suffer as a result of the hero’s death become victims of force, and therefore things; acknowledgement of this suffering is a result of respect for the dignity of human life lost, whether that of the heroic dead or the disempowered. In fact, Thomas Greene sees a unifying potential for mourning in epic. When he reads texts like the *Iliad* and *Beowulf*, he observes that “the resolution of tears that ends both Homeric poems ends *most* of the European poems that we commonly describe as epics. Most of them conclude quite literally in tears, and those few that fail to do so tend to center on a pivotal scene of mourning” (192). Thus, Greene argues that epic has the capacity “to create a community of shared mourners” by inviting the reader to grieve along with the mourners in the poem (189). Obviously, those who join this community of shared mourners as the audience of heroic literature bear the memory of the dead hero into the future. Yet more importantly, this audience also serves as the only living humans outside the world of the poem to grieve for the undead, from Andromache to the *Geatisc meowle*.

**Mourning Present**

Today, readers of the epic may be joined by readers of war. Because the geography of the North American continent insulates it from direct attack, while modern technology allows troops to travel great distances to do battle, only the warrior class in contemporary America is directly affected by armed conflict, while the rest of us become its audience. Whereas the deaths of Beowulf and Hector resulted in the extinction for their people, in twenty-first century North America and across most of Western Europe, the death of a leader is unlikely to result in slavery, exile, or dispossession for the average citizen. Thus, the vast majority of members of Western society realistically may expect they will be mourned and remembered, as it is unlikely that they will die as victims of force.

Perhaps it is this degree of security in their own personhood that allows some citizens of the West to concern themselves with the thing-status of those beyond our borders through participation in the Iraq Body Count
Project, “an ongoing human security project which maintains and updates the world’s only independent and comprehensive public database of media-reported civilian deaths in Iraq” (Dardagan et al.). The rationale for the project states:

Most actors in conflict, whether state or non-state, have historically displayed little serious interest in documenting and investigating civilian deaths and their causes. . . . Be they men, women or children, civilian casualties, [sic] are the most unacceptable consequence of all wars. . . . We believe it is a moral and humanitarian duty for each such death to be recorded, publicised, given the weight it deserves, compensated appropriately and, where possible, investigated to establish whether there are grounds for criminal proceedings. (Dardagan et al.)

It is this historical lack of interest in commemorating non-warrior victims of force that leaves only the victim to preemptively mourn for herself or himself in heroic literature. While this continues to be a characteristic of the contemporary ruling class (including governments, the military, and often global bodies like the United Nations) it is remarkable that civilians have taken responsibility for the acknowledgement of each and every civilian death in a putatively enemy nation. In fact, the Iraq Body Count Project maintains that this “duty of ‘recorder’ falls particularly heavily on the ordinary citizens of those states whose military forces took the actions which precipitated civilian deaths” (Dardagan et al.). And so, while we continue to maintain a distinction between warrior and civilian in our society, the “ordinary citizens” of a force-wielding people are today implicated in a process that involves even otherwise immune North American civilians. The right to be remembered that we claim for ourselves may be extended even to the dead of enemy nations, warding off thing-status and preserving their personhood. “It is to these all too easily disregarded victims of violence that Iraq Body Count is dedicated,” the founders state, “and we are resolute that they, too, shall have their memorials” (Dardagan et al.). At the time of this writing, this includes between 62,281 and 68,289 human lives lost.

Mourning for the warrior class in the contemporary West has under-
gone a parallel evolution. Not only the elite heroes of the aristocracy but every warrior killed by force may now receive a military funeral, an appropriate shift considering the socioeconomic class from which many US troops are drawn. In fact, our culture has begun to insist on the inalienable right of every dead soldier to such a memorial. By violating her son’s right to proper commemoration, Cindy Sheehan has become the most infamous mourner for the war in Iraq, a woman and mother whose critics find her behavior entirely inappropriate in that Sheehan initially refused to place a tombstone at her son Casey’s gravesite. Therefore, according to the *Vacaville Reporter*, “The absence of a headstone on Casey’s grave became fodder for Sheehan’s critics last year, who accused her of being negligent and disrespectful.” In response, Sheehan wrote the online essay “A Markerless Grave in Vacaville” to explain her reluctance to accept Casey’s status as thing:

> For the first year after Casey was killed, I didn’t want to believe it. I didn’t want to place a TOMBstone on my son’s grave. I didn’t want one more marble proof that my son was dead. I couldn’t even call where he was buried a “cemetery,” I had to call it “Casey’s Park.” I placed fresh flowers in the cup every week and journaled there almost on a daily basis, and often laid on it and fell asleep and dreamed of my needlessly killed son.

Sheehan further undermines Casey’s status as a warrior by insisting, “My Casey wasn’t always a soldier. He was a son and brother whose murder has left an aching hole in our lives worse than an amputation.” Sheehan’s remembrance of Casey in his civilian roles as son and brother detracts from his primary identification as a warrior who has earned the right to a marble tombstone. Moreover, while Sheehan may well be melancholic, she refuses to leave Casey in the past; instead, she insists that his spirit lives on: “Casey’s shell is buried in Vacaville, California, not his spirit. He lives with me and he is constantly with me as I travel the world so other families, Iraqi or American, do not have to bury their children. Casey lives in the hearts of everyone who wants peace and works for peace. He will never truly die.” Through these statements, Sheehan has refused to honor her son’s right to a warrior’s burial. By insisting that Casey lives on, Shee-
han denies his status as a thing; thus, there is no need for her to focus on the past, on the time when he was a living human performing supposedly glorious battle deeds. And because Casey is with her in spirit, there is no need for Sheehan to mark the place where his body, a mere “shell,” rests in Vacaville.

In Sheehan’s most direct response to her critics, she contests the very significance of her son’s burial:

> Have any of these people who claim that I am pissing on my son’s grave even visited him? Have they visited the grave of any soldier needlessly or senselessly killed in George’s war of choice for oil and profit? Have they sobbed uncontrollably for my first born who shouldn’t even need a gravestone? No, all they want to do is attack a mother who wants to prevent other people from having to bury their own child. They want to perpetuate a war that has already killed many thousands of our fellow human beings for absolutely nothing. (“A Markerless Grave”)

Sheehan’s critics view her refusal to erect a tombstone as “pissing on [her] son’s grave.” Their logic requires the past deeds of the dead soldier to be praised and remembered through the creation of a physical memorial, like Beowulf’s barrow. Yet Sheehan problematizes her son’s status as hero by insisting on his civilian identity as her child, rather than viewing him solely as a warrior. She also questions the commander-in-chief who asserted force in a “war of choice,” rather than through a war of necessity. This is why her son has been “needlessly or senselessly killed” for “absolutely nothing.” As a corollary, erecting a gravestone for Casey would signify her praise of his role as warrior in a war Sheehan cannot support. Sheehan furthermore asserts the emotion of grief as preeminent in assigning significance to the mourning ritual. Sheehan grounds her right to decide how Casey should be mourned on the grief she experiences daily, in contrast to her detractors, whose insistence on memorializing Casey is hypocritical if they do not themselves attend the graves of the slain. In contrast, Sheehan expresses solidarity with those who have already shared this experience, and wishes to prevent others from doing so. Sheehan’s conclusion states her position most succinctly: “No more needless grave-
stones. No more wasted lives.” Thus, whereas Sheehan’s critics view a gravestone as symbolic of the soldier’s right to a past praised and remembered, for Sheehan, every soldier’s gravestone represents the waste of a human life.

Nonetheless, more than two years after her son’s death, Sheehan did erect a physical memorial at Casey’s gravesite. In an email to the Reporter, she states, “It is important for the rest of Casey’s family to have one. I guess the pain of seeing it etched in marble that he is dead is another pain I will have to deal with.” Although Casey now has a tombstone, the inscription on the “elegant marble slab” continues to complicate his remembrance: “Our Casey. Ever faithful, kind and gentle, good son, beloved brother, brave soldier, dear friend, you loved your family and lived your life serving others to the end.” The iconography includes a cross, thickets of trees, “a military insignia, the theater, Eagle Scouts, Van Halen, the World Wrestling Federation and Superman.” Thus, while Casey has received his hero’s memorial, the label “brave soldier” and the military insignia are overwhelmed by emblems of Casey’s civilian characteristics, roles, and interests. The past that Sheehan has begun to come to terms with seems to be that of “our Casey,” her son, rather than her critics’ Casey, the soldier.

While Sheehan’s putative disrespect for her son’s grave was reviled by those on the right, the disruption of military funerals by the Reverend Fred Phelps has enraged both ends of the political spectrum. Kansas-based Reverend Fred Phelps and his followers, the congregation of the Westboro Baptist Church, preserve the ancient tradition of funeral interruption enacted in literature by Achilles, Grendel’s mother, and the Vikings. This strategy seems in part to be retaliation against the US military for bombing Phelps’ compound, as explained on his website, godhatesfags.com, under the headline:

August 20, 1995—The Night America Bombed Westboro Baptist Church With An IED (Improvised Explosive Device) In A Cowardly Move To Stop WBC’s Anti-Gay Gospel Preaching—Thereby Bringing Down The Unmitigated And Irreversible Wrath of God Upon This Evil Nation, Manifesting Itself In The Daily Bloody IED-Deaths of American Soldiers In Iraq And Other Places.
More generally, Phelps believes that American tolerance for “sodomites” is being punished by God through national tragedies, including casualties in Iraq. Clearly, this interruption of the grieving process is intended to insult those whom Phelps views as his enemies, as evidenced by his slogan, “They turned America over to fags; they’re coming home in body bags.” Yet Phelps offers the following explanation of why he targets funerals in particular: “To warn the people who are still living that unless they repent, they will likewise perish. When people go to funerals, they have thoughts of mortality, heaven, hell, eternity, etc., on their minds. It’s the perfect time to warn them of things to come.” Because most of Phelps’ targets are military funerals, he has incorrectly interpreted the orientation of his targets’ psyche as future-focused, rather than involved in cathexis of the past. Moreover, Phelps interprets the deaths of American soldiers not as the outcome of force, but as the will of God, from which Phelps and his followers, as members of the elect, are exempt.

As a member of the elect preaching to the elect, Phelps does not need to state his position rationally in order to reach a broad, mainstream audience. The response to Phelps’ protests has, however, been quite coherent. A community of veterans has gathered to create a space for the family of the fallen warrior to grieve by drowning out Phelps’ protests. According to their mission statement, the Patriot Guard Riders “attend the funeral services of fallen American heroes as invited guests of the family” in order to both show their respect and to “shield the mourning family and friends from interruptions created by any protestors or group of protestors.” While most of the members seem to be motorcyclists and/or veterans, the group welcomes all comers: “The only prerequisite is respect.” Yet by claiming for themselves the roles of patriot and guardian, even those non-veterans in their midst share a metaphorical, if not material, identity as warriors. Thus, these riders may be juxtaposed to the twelve men riding around Beowulf’s barrow, both groups of warriors who remember a fallen hero, and who hope to be remembered as heroes themselves.

In a more official capacity, as a result of Phelps’ funeral protests, over half the fifty states have passed or proposed legislation restricting such demonstrations, including Colorado’s “Right to Rest in Peace Act” and Missouri’s Spc. Edward Lee Myers’ Law. Several of these states, including Delaware, Florida, and Mississippi, have restricted protests at military funerals only, or have given particular mention to military as opposed to civil-
ian events. For example, Kentucky has protected funerals in general because “all mourners should be left in peace,” but the very first rationale of the bill cites “certain despicable individuals [who] have been disrupting the funerals of soldiers who died while serving in the United States Armed Forces.” At the federal level, to restrict demonstrations at Arlington National Cemetery, President George W. Bush signed the Respect for America’s Fallen Heroes Act, which concludes, “It is the sense of Congress that each State should enact legislation to restrict demonstrations near any military funeral.” A similar law (S.4042) prohibits disruption of military funerals on national cemetery property, out of “respect for the funerals of fallen heroes.” More wide-ranging is the Dignity for Military Funerals Act of 2006, introduced and referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which states that, “No State or unit of local government shall issue a permit allowing, or otherwise authorize, picketing during the funeral of a member or former member of the armed forces.” We must note that the wording of such legislation applies the same logic that dictated the response to Cindy Sheehan’s experience of her own son’s death: the right of the dead warrior to a proper burial takes precedence over the right of the mourner to grieve in peace.

It is the hero’s right to be mourned that results in the great expenditure of time, wealth, energy, and resources in a funeral like Beowulf’s, in the outcry against Casey Sheehan’s lack of a headstone, and in the disapproval for Fred Phelps voiced at both ends of the political spectrum. Through groups like the Patriot Guard Riders and phenomena such as the military funeral itself, warrior communities continue in their traditional function as preservers of the fallen hero’s memory. As the material stakes of the individual hero’s death have decreased in modern America, while more individual subjects in our society can realistically hope that they will likewise be remembered, the duty to remember has expanded to include both women and civilians. While the hero’s right to be mourned is now receiving unprecedented protection under US law, our society is also beginning to take responsibility for mourning those civilian victims of force whose human rights have been violated. As it falls to the audience of Beowulf and the Iliad to mourn with Andromache and the Geatisc meowle, so the civilians behind the Iraq Body Count Project are counting not just things or bodies, but individual human lives. Such responses to death in twenty-first century Western culture are a hallmark of progress in the arena of human rights and welfare, as we begin to resist the thing-status of both
warrior and civilian. Yet we must not view these differences from the epic past in a self-congratulatory mode. The deaths of countless Iraqi civilians and the many needless tombstones of American soldiers both serve to remind us of the wages of force as it is wielded in the contemporary world.

Notes

1. *The Iliad* is cited, by book and line number, from the translation by Robert Fagles, and *Beowulf* is cited by line number from the edition by Fr. Klaeber. All translations from Old English are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

2. Hatað heðomæré hlæw gewyrcean
beorhtne æfter hæle æt brimes nosan;
se scel to gemyndum minum leodum
heah hlifian on Hronesnæsse,
æt his sæli Í end syÍÍ an hatan
Biowulfes biorh . . . .

3. According to Daniell and Thompson, “Cremation is a much more labour-intensive option than burial. A pyre was constructed over the fully dressed and supine body. After the cremation the burnt bones and ashes were deposited in a cremation urn, or more rarely a cloth bag or bronze bowl, and buried” (70). Owen-Crocker also discusses this funeral, among the poem’s others, in *The Four Funerals in Beowulf*.

4. Þa ymbe hlæw riodan hildedeore,
æþelinga bearn, ealra twelfe,
woldon care cwiðan, ond kyning mænan,
wordgyd wrecan, ond ymb wer sprecan;
eahþoden eorlscipe ond his ellenweorc
duguðum demdon, swa hit gedefe bið,
æt mon his winedryhten wordum herge,
ferhðum freoge, þonne he forð scile
of lichaman læded weordan.
Swa begnornodon Geata leode
hlafordes hryre, heorðgeneatas.

5. Skeat, 2:132: So, then the Vikings went back to their ship, and hid the head of the holy Edmund in the thick brambles so that it would not be buried. (Hwæt ða se flot-here ferde eft to scipe · and behyddon þæt heafod þæs halgan eadmundes · on þam þiccum bremelum · þæt hit bebyrged ne wurde.)
6. Skeat, 2:136–37: wurdon wiðe sarige for his slege on mode · and huru · æt hi næfdon · æt heafod to · am bodige.

7. Noðer hy hine ne moston, syðdan mergen cwom, Denia leode bronde forbærman, ne on bel hladan, leofne mannan; hio þæt lic ætbær feondes fæð(mum un)der firgenstream. þæt wæs Hroðgare hreowa tornost þara þe leodfruman lange begeate.

8. 3131b–33: dracan ec scufun, / wyrm ofer weallclif, leton weg niman, / flod fæðmian frætwa hyrde.

9. swylce giómorgyd (æfter Biowulf) (song) sorgcearig, þæt hio hyre (hearmda)gas vællylla worn, (æfter B)undende (song) sorgcearig, swide geneahhe, ðæt hio hyre (hearmda)gas hearde (ondrê)de, (wîgen)des egesan, hy[n]ðo (ond) h(æfny)d.

10. Mustanoja offers a masterful explanation of the unnamed woman’s editorial lineage (25).

11. maððum to gemyndum, nalles earl wegan habban on healse ne mægð scyne ac sceal geomormod, hringweorðunge, oft nalles æne golde bereafod nu se herewisa elland tredan, nånes æðeda, gamen ond gleodream.

12. See Kay, “Casey Sheehan’s grave receives its headstone.” All quotations from the Vacaville Reporter are from this source.

13. See Sheehan, “A Markerless Grave.” Quotations from Sheehan, unless otherwise noted, refer to this source.

14. Sheehan’s email to the Reporter and the description of the headstone are included in Kay, “Casey Sheehan’s grave receives its headstone.”

15. See Buchanan, “Funeral Protests.”
Works Cited


Mourning Rights: Beowulf, the Iliad, and the War in Iraq


Who Cares? Novel Reading, Narrative Attachment Disorder, and the Case of *The Old Curiosity Shop*

Maria K. Bachman

“to feel and know that, come what might, they were alone in the world with no one to help or advise or care about them”
—Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (76)

“heaps of fantastic things . . . huddled together”

In an oft-cited passage from the first chapter of Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the unnamed narrator speculates on why the story of Nell has aroused his interest. Unable to dismiss from his thoughts an image of “the child in her bed: alone, unwatched, uncared for (save by angels),” the narrator muses:

We are so much in the habit of allowing impressions to be made upon us by external objects, which should be produced by reflection alone, but which, without such visible aids, often escape us, that I am not sure I should have been so thoroughly possessed by this one subject, but for the heaps of fantastic things I had seen huddled together in the curiosity-dealer’s warehouse. These, crowding on my mind, in connection with the child, and gathering round
This passage warrants our attention for a number of reasons. First, as a narrative report of a thought act, it offers a literary representation of the thinking mind—what Alan Palmer calls “Cognitive Mental Functioning” (CMF). Specifically, the narrator here posits a theoretical and functional approach to the notion of attention—that is, how we perceive or respond to someone or something within our field of awareness. Second, the narrator’s imagining of a neglected child, “alone, unwatched, [and] uncared for,” establishes an ethics of narrative care and concern, and implicitly demonstrates the interconnection between cognition and emotion. Third, and somewhat related, curiosity is introduced as both narrative strategy and subject of the novel. The narrator is struck not so much by Nell’s isolation, her “strange and solitary state,” but because she is surrounded by curiosities, “heaps of fantastic things.” He says, “It would be a curious speculation to imagine her in her future life, holding her solitary way among a crowd of grotesque wild companions” (20). Though Nell is herself a curiosity (and has ranked highly among Dickens’s most displaced and dispossessed characters), the reader is to attend to her, as the narrator does, as inextricably connected to rather than isolated from those “shapes about her.” This is corroborated by Dickens himself, who in a preface to a later edition of the novel, wrote: “...in writing the book, I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed” (The Old Curiosity Shop 6). Finally, while we might be inclined to view Nell allegorically—and certainly, we would not be alone: critics have long fixed on Nell as the embodiment of youthful innocence and innate goodness—the narrator confounds (and perhaps corrects) such a simplistic (and redundant) allegorical identity with the word “seemed.”

Drawing on cognitive science, narrative theory, moral philosophy, and evolutionary psychology, and in the spirit of the essai, I offer here my own “curious speculation” about how curiosity and concern for others is cognitively and emotionally mediated in fiction. Although Nicholas Dames has drawn our attention to the ways in which Victorian physiologists, psychol-
ogists, and literary critics saw the novel as “a machine for the production of affect” (206–16), I think it is equally productive to think about how narrative fiction can impede both thinking and feeling. My discussion is based on two premises: one, that human experience generally is the subject of literature; and two, that there is a significant and productive correlation to be made in the cognitive mental functioning of both fictional and real minds. As Joseph Carroll points out in Literary Darwinism, “art provides an emotionally and subjectively intelligible mode of reality, and it is within such models that human beings organize their complex behaviors in response to contingent circumstances.” These imaginative models, moreover, “direct our behavior by entering into our motivational system at its very roots—our feelings, our ideas, and our values” (xxii).

It is generally assumed that feeling is an obvious and automatic correlative to literary response—that there is an inherent affective force at work in literature—but what I suggest here is that reading novels may shape and constrain the cognitive processes related to concern for others. As has been well noted, Dickens’s 1841 novel (the so-called story of Little Nell) was extravagantly admired among contemporary readers for its ennobling appeal to emotion—in fact, Dickens’s friend and biographer John Forster noted that The Old Curiosity Shop provided “a kind of discipline of feeling and emotion which would do me lasting good” (qtd. in Letters xi)—and was then thoroughly denounced by subsequent generations for its “uncontrolled squandering of sentiment.” Today, it is a novel that critics and readers tend to care less and less about, and indeed, that very few could even claim to be genuinely attached to. As John Bowen writes, The Old Curiosity Shop is “almost universally, thought to be a text of notorious sentimentality, morbid and uncontrolled, embarrassing and absurd by turns” (133). Yet, The Old Curiosity Shop is a novel that at its very center, in its margins, between the lines, and beyond its pages, questions the extent to which curiosity—as an expression of care and attention—is necessarily a constituent part of our humanity. Following neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s claim that “consciousness and emotion are not separable” and “that when consciousness is impaired so is emotion” (16), I want to explore curiosity, first, as a cognitive and affective state that possesses intentionality and influences action, and second, as a disposition that is a necessary precondition to compassion, what Martha Nussbaum describes
as that “painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune or suffering” (2001, 301).7

Though curiosity carries with it a kind of situational spontaneity, I am interested in its more deliberative function of cognitive appraisal in both activating and constraining emotion. The case of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is particularly apropos in my mind to the project of identifying an aspect of fictional mental functioning that has been thus far neglected in narrative theory: narrative inattention. Using Theory of Mind (ToM), our evolved cognitive capacity to infer what other people are thinking, perceiving, or feeling (also known as “mindreading”), I want to begin to account for the failure of curiosity, the failure of a character to sustain a cognitive fix on something or someone within his or her perceptual field of awareness. According to Lisa Zunshine, “applying ToM to our study of fiction is what makes literature as we know it possible. The very process of making sense of what we read appears to be grounded in our ability to invest the flimsy verbal constructions that we generously call ‘characters’ with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires and then to look for the ‘cues’ that would allow us to guess at their feelings and predict their actions” (10). In applying ToM to Dickens’s novel, I investigate how the novel might trigger “narrative attachment disorder” by programming the cognitive machinery of both characters and readers to disengage. As these subjects navigate and negotiate their respective fictive and real-life environments, even we barely notice their inattention, their disaffection, their inability to feel compassion for, or even recognize the suffering bodies of others, thus challenging the claim that “novels dispel obtuseness and awaken us to a range of ethical possibilities” (Nussbaum 1998, 359).

In that first chapter to *The Old Curiosity Shop* referenced above, the narrator Master Humphrey informs us that it is a peculiar habit of his to wander through London at night “speculating on the characters and occupations of those who fill the streets” (7): “the slipshod beggar,” “the booted exquisite,” “the sauntering outcast,” “the expectant pleasure seeker,” the potential suicide, noisy drunkards, and even a “poor bird” (8). He is someone who is disposed towards wondering about and feeling for others who have no apparent bearing on his own schemes and goals. On this particular evening, it is the young girl who has lost her way; concerned for her safety and wondering what kind of caretaker would leave a child alone at night, he insists on seeing Nell safely home. As it turns out,
“home” is a curiosity shop, filled with “a great many scattered articles,” including the girl’s grandfather, “a little old man with long grey hair” (11). In response to Master Humphrey’s admonishment to take better care of his granddaughter, the improvident guardian (who we learn goes to gambling dens each night) emphatically insists that Nell is “the one object of [his] care.” Though he reluctantly departs from the shop, Master Humphrey is unable to “dismiss her from [his] recollection, do what [he] would” (20). For the next few chapters of the novel, Nell is focalized through Master Humphrey until he curiously “detaches” himself from the narrative so as to enable those characters “who have prominent and necessary parts” to “speak and act for themselves” (33). Margolin explains that focalization involves “an external object to be attended to”: “Each act of focusing one’s attention on some external sensory data is also deictically anchored in a unique way, being indexed to a particular embodied mind, that is an individual space, time, and person combination” (282–83). This abrupt shift in perspective, from first-person narrative mode to a third-person omniscient perspective, not only reveals the multi-layered complexity of focalization in the novel, but also shifts the burden of story world stewardship, of curiosity about others, onto the reader.8

“old and curious things, which seem to crouch in odd corners”

In addition to this moment of narrative detachment, another significant disappearing act occurs early the novel—the curiosity shop itself:

it was one of those receptacles for old and curious things, which seem to crouch in odd corners of this town, and to hide their musty treasures from the public eye in jealousy and distrust. There were suits of mail, standing like ghosts in armour here and there; fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters; rusty weapons of various kinds; distorted figures in china, and wood, and iron, and ivory; tapestry and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams. (11)

After the curiosity shop is seized by the loathsome moneylender Quilp—to whom Nell’s grandfather, as a result of his gambling mania, has sunk hopelessly in debt—and its inventory of oddities is sold off at the end of
chapter 13, it barely figures in the narrative, leaving us to wonder why Dickens titled the novel as he did. What are we to make of this junk shop—an unattended confusion, from floor to ceiling, of discarded bric-a-brac in various states of disrepair? Is this repository of gothic curios—things that no longer seem to have any intrinsic value or practical use—a mere backdrop to Nell and her grandfather? Though “the old curiosity shop” does not seem to represent adequately the novel’s plot, there is an implicit correlation between these old objects—(which are considered to be junk, more so than rare curios or curiosities)—and the odd assortment of characters, the “wild, grotesque companions,” who are to be found “crouching in the odd corners” of the narrative. Indeed, we might see the “curiosity shop” as a rhetorical trope for humanity—“the human curiosity shop.” Dickens, in fact, calls our attention to the similarities between people and objects in his description of the lawyer Mr. Brass as “the ugliest piece of goods in all the stock” (102), and throughout their travels, the assembly of strange figures Nell and her grandfather encounter is a salient reminder of “the dumb and senseless things they had known and loved” but left behind (337).

Completely dispossessed, Nell and her grandfather flee London and “abandon themselves to the mercies of a stranger world” (337). Though critics have described Nell’s journey as a nightmarish experience, with danger lurking around every corner, it stands to reason that she is in far greater danger before their escape, wandering the city streets at night and conveying messages to the lecherous Quilp by day. When Nell and her grandfather leave the city for the English countryside, they do so in search of “relief from the gloomy solitude in which she had lived, an escape from the heartless people by whom she had been surrounded in her late time of trial” (101). Indeed, London is described as a “Babel” where “ruin and self-murder were crouching in every street” (120–21). As they traverse an unfamiliar landscape, they meet and form associations with admittedly unfamiliar, yet nonetheless a wonder-ful—not dangerous—cast of characters, including Codlin and Short, the Punch and Judy showmen, Mrs. Jarley, the traveling waxworks proprietor, and a mournful schoolmaster, among countless others. While these characters might be “foreign to her nature,” they pose no threat of violence to Nell; most, in fact, provide welcome relief or a safe haven, however, short-lived. They are “the mercies of a stranger world” and thus are an integral part of Nell’s survival.
Historically, readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop* seemed to have suffered from a lack of narrative acuity. Focused on the so-called “dangers” that beset Nell—and most of these threats are dubious at best—readers have been blind to the macro- and microscopic connections among those individuals “crouching in odd corners.” James Kincaid confirms this point in *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*: “it is certainly the pathetic Nell who is at the centre of the novel and who makes the primary demands on our responsiveness. But the dominant critical error is to separate Nell from surroundings” (81). Margolin has observed that literature “abounds in episodes embodying numerous varieties of attention and attention failure with respect to visual and auditory data, especially the sight and speech of other human beings” (290). Of course, blindness to social injustices is a theme that resonates throughout Dickens’s fiction, though moral obtuseness is more finely nuanced in *The Old Curiosity Shop* than in novels such as *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, and *Bleak House*, among others. Like the unclassified and discarded contents of the curiosity shop, these characters are literally and figuratively marginalized because they have no “cognitive status” in Nell’s mind. Though they enter, however briefly, the physical and social space of the narrative, they are not at the forefront of Nell’s attention and concern. And because the reader’s attention to these figures (many of whom remain nameless) is dependent upon their “predominance in the mind of the focalizer” (Emmott 316), we are likely to overlook them non-consciously (as does Nell herself) or simply dismiss them as “backdrop” if they don’t appear to impact Nell’s schemes and goals. Yet Nell’s plight, while ultimately tragic, is not nearly as grim as the state of abject poverty and extreme desolation of some of the novel’s “background” figures. In fact, far more often, Nell finds herself on the receiving end of others’ attention: “Alas! even careless strangers—they who would go away and forget next week that such a being lived—even they saw it—even they pitied her—even they bade him good day compassionately, and whis- pered as they passed” (414). As Kincaid observes, readers tend to concentrate primarily on Nell as the “central figure of the pathos,” even though she “support[s] very little meaning or emotion” (78–79).

“We shall never forget . . . to be grateful . . . for your kindness”

Alan Palmer argues that one way in which readers comprehend texts is by constructing a “continuing consciousness out of the isolated passages
of text that relate to a particular character.” This “continuing-consciousness frame” is an individual narrative, consisting of “a character’s various perceptual and conceptual viewpoints, ideological worldviews, and plans for the future . . . that is embedded in the whole fictional text” (15). Following Palmer’s “embedded narrative approach” and biologist E.O. Wilson’s model of human consciousness as a virtual world composed of “scenarios”—“coding networks of sensory impressions” (119)—we can begin to account for Nell’s own cognitive biases in how and whether she responds to environmental stimuli. Perpetually “on the run,” fatigue and hunger are the main hardships with which Nell and her grandfather are faced and their survival depends primarily on the compassion and charity of others. Early in their journey, Nell attempts to identify among a group of poor laborers someone who might be willing to offer them a place to rest and something to eat. As we shall see, Nell’s perceptual selectivity—her curiosity—is driven by survival. “Timid and fearful of being repulsed” (125), she settles on a hut where there is a family seated around the table, “chiefly because there was an old man sitting in a cushioned chair beside the hearth, and she thought he was a grandfather and would feel for hers” (126). The depiction here of Nell’s thinking mind—her perceptual awareness—is significant in the way in which it conjoins cognition and emotion: she identifies a potential short-term benefactor based on the Aristotelian judgment of similar possibilities. She appeals to those individuals, in other words, who might be just as vulnerable to suffering as she is—those individuals who could very well encounter (or perhaps have already encountered) a similar kind of misfortune or tragedy.

Nell knows intuitively that in order for the old man to show concern, he must not only recognize their suffering, but he must be aware of the possibilities it poses for his life. In other words, if the old man is able to acknowledge some community or fellow-feeling, only then will he be moved to show compassion to these two victims. As Nussbaum points out, compassion generally “includes the thought of common humanity, insofar as it comes joined with the judgment of similar possibilities” (2001, 371). Nell judges correctly as “the request was no sooner preferred, than granted” (125), and the cottage family scrambles to ensure the comfort of the two weary travelers. This imagining of similar possibilities is also demonstrated in the mother’s subtle recognition of Nell’s physical impairment: “the woman had observed, from the young wanderer’s gait, that one
of her little feet was blistered and sore, and being a woman and a mother too, she would not suffer her to go until she had washed the place and applied some simple remedy, which she did so carefully and with such a gentle hand” (126). It is in this instance (and similar instances) when Nell and her grandfather are the recipients of other’s compassion and care, that she takes notice of and interest in her surroundings: “as the child glanced round, she felt a tranquil air of comfort and content to which she had long been unaccustomed” (127). As Wilson points out, the mind “throws a spotlight on those portions of the world it must know in order to live to the next day, and surrenders the rest to darkness” (105). Indeed, Nell’s curiosity is contingent upon other’s curiosity—their attentiveness to and interest in her. Furthermore, it is because this family fits into Nell’s schemes and goals for survival, that her own feelings of gratitude and fellow-feeling are activated: “When she turned her head, she saw that the whole family, even the old grandfather, were standing in the road watching them as they went, and so, with many waves of the hand, and cheering nods, and on one side at least not without tears, they parted company” (127).

Similarly, Nell’s mind reading abilities—her possession of a Theory of Mind—is facilitated only when someone is essential to her plans and goals, when her survival is at stake. It is at this point in their journey when Nell and her grandfather find themselves “quite exhausted and [can] no longer maintain the pace at which they had fled” (184), that they enter a small village in hopes of “seeking a humble lodging” (187). From a distance, they notice a schoolmaster, “a pale, simple-looking man, of a spare and meagre habit,” sitting in the garden before his cottage. Nell infers from his manner that he was “uneasy” and “distressed,” but ironically, the schoolmaster does not notice them. As they were “very tired” and night was upon them, Nell eventually musters up her “courage” and approaches him. Just as the poor laboring family extended a warm welcome without hesitation, so too the schoolmaster shares his meager provisions and insists that they spend the night in his humble dwellings. Nell’s perceptual awareness—her ability to notice and take an interest in her surroundings—is triggered only when she is on the receiving end of another’s compassion and care: “The child looked round the room,” taking detailed note of the various curiosities that adorn the schoolroom and inquiring about the specimens of writing that are displayed on the wall. Noting a certain “sadness in [the schoolmaster’s] voice and manner,” Nell offers her anxious
concern—“‘I hope there is nothing the matter, sir,’ said Nell anxiously” (189)—which prompts the schoolmaster’s tragic story of his dying pupil. Damasio emphasizes that “[s]ome level of emoting is the obligate accompaniment of thinking about oneself or about one’s surroundings.” and “when consciousness is available, feelings have their maximum impact, and individuals are able to reflect and plan” (58). As witness to the unbearable grief that the schoolmaster suffers over the death of his favorite young scholar, Nell too is overcome with emotion:

when she was alone, [she] gave free vent to the sorrow with which her breast was overcharged. But the sad scene she had witnessed, was not without its lesson of content and gratitude; of content with the lot which left her health and freedom; and gratitude that she was spared to the one relative and friend she loved, and to live and move in a beautiful world, when so many young creatures—as young and full of hope as she—were stricken down and gathered to their graves. (198)

Here, the emotions—(and there are several: grief, sorrow, gratitude, comfort)—are inextricably linked with cognition. According to Nussbaum, “[t]he recognition of one’s own related vulnerability is, then, an important and frequently an indispensable epistemological requirement for compassion in human beings” (2001, 219). Indeed, the real cause of Nell’s tears is an acute sense of both her own vulnerability, and of her own good fortune, rather than any kind of recognition of universal human frailty and suffering. The misfortunes of others exert little to no claim on Nell; she may be affected by others’ sufferings as they impinge on her own well-being, but she is not moved to respond in any real way to situations not her own.15

But while Nell’s compassion seems appropriate, natural, and even familiar to the reader, we might wonder why Nell appears to be so unaffected by the plight of the old man who lost his son (chapter 15), or of the old woman whose husband dies in their youth (chapter 17), or of the Birmingham laborer who has suffered the deaths of his three children (chapter 44). And it is not just the attentive literary critic who would pose such a question; such a discrepancy is just as curious to the neuroscientist
as it is to the moral philosopher. As Damasio wonders, “[t]here is something Orwellian about the distributions of emotions in our world. . . . [Why is it that] all objects can get some emotional attachment, but some objects get far more than others” (58)? Nussbaum similarly asks, “Why does the imagination focus on some objects and not on others, and how is this selection relevant to the thought content of emotions” (2001, 66)? While cognitive science holds that most of our cognitive mental activities are indeed “unconscious”—that information being processed in the brain occurs “behind the scenes,” without any self-awareness or attention (Palmer 107)—we might wonder how and why certain mental images are not processed or remain dormant. What perceptual factors, in other words, determine or contribute to cognitive selectivity?

“They were but an atom . . . in a mountain heap of misery”

To account for this emotional disconnect and explain the impediments to compassion’s operation, Nussbaum theorizes that, in compassion, “our ability to picture vividly the predicament of a person assists in the emotion’s formation,” and “we may feel less emotion toward other cases that we can’t similarly imagine with vividness, though they may have a similar structure” (2001, 66). Though the individuals mentioned above may very well suffer through no fault of their own, Nell’s failure to respond with compassion is best explained by what Nussbaum describes as the “eudaimonistic judgment.” According to Nussbaum, emotions are fundamentally and sometimes problematically eudaimonistic in that they are almost always self-referential judgments linked to what we regard as fundamental to our well-being. Nell is unable to invest those nameless figures with value or to attach to them because she does not regard them as necessary for her eudaimonia—her own flourishing and survival. These individuals are of little concern to Nell, not simply because they are strangers—after all, the schoolmaster, Mrs. Jarley, and others were strangers as well—but because they are not integral to furthering her own plans.

Perhaps what is most curious about this novel is that while an entire generation of critics and readers mourned for Nell, Nell herself seems incapable of caring for those who suffer, much less mourning for them. In response to Nell’s physical deterioration in chapters 52 and 53, emotionally distraught readers pleaded with Dickens to spare little Nell’s life. In a
letter to his publishers on 24 November 1841, Dickens wrote, “I am inundated with imploring letters recommending poor little Nell to mercy” (*Letters* 2:153). And though Dickens would follow through with John Forster’s early suggestion that Nell should die young, writing her death was nonetheless an extremely difficult and heartbreaking experience for him: “The difficulty has been tremendous—the anguish unspeakable,” he told Forster (*Letters* 2:144). Despite his own personal distress, Dickens was determined to evoke an outpouring of emotion. Upon completion of the novel, he wrote to Forster, “When I first began (on your valued suggestion) to keep my thoughts upon this ending of the tale, I resolved to try and do something which might be read by people about whom Death had been,—with a softened feeling, and with consolation” (*Letters* 2:188).

Similarly, in a speech he gave at Edinburgh in 1841, Dickens explained that, “[n]ot untried in the school of affliction, in the death of those we love, I thought what a good thing it would be if in my little work of pleasant amusement I could substitute a garland of fresh flowers for the sculptured horrors that disgrace the tomb” (*Speeches* 10). Consider also the pathos that Dickens was trying to evoke in his instructions to George Cattermole for the illustration “The Death-Bed of Little Nell”:

The child lying dead in the little sleeping room, which is behind the open screen. It is winter-time, so there are no flowers; but upon her breast and pillow, and about her bed, there may be strips of holly and berries, and such free green things. Window overgrown with ivy. The little boy who had that talk with her about angels may be by the bedside, if you like it so; but I think it will be quieter and more peaceful if she is alone. I want it to express the most beautiful repose and tranquility, and to have something of a happy look, if death can . . . I am breaking my heart over this story, and cannot bear to finish it. (*Letters* 2:172)$^{18}$

In this deathbed scene, which has been widely criticized for its vulgar exploitation of sentiment, Nell (who has been dead for two days) is mourned by throngs of inconsolable loved ones, friends, and the most casual acquaintances: “Decrepit age, and vigorous life, and blooming youth, and helpless infancy, poured forth—on crutches, in the pride of strength and
health, in the full blush of promise, in the mere dawn of life—to gather round her tomb. . . . All were sincere and truthful in their sorrow” (541–42). In death, as in life, Nell is surrounded by caring others.

In one of the most scathing and vitriolic contemporary reviews of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Charles Algernon Swinburne blasted Nell as “a child whom nothing can ever irritate, whom nothing can ever baffle, whom nothing can ever delude, and whom nothing can ever dismay . . . a monster as inhuman as a baby with two heads” (196). Swinburne’s outrage went beyond the outpouring of emotion surrounding Nell’s death; he was disgusted with her inexplicable passivity and her dubious claim to absolute goodness. Indeed, throughout her travels, she encounters many individuals who suffer, like herself, dispossession, death, and despair, and yet, Nell remains notably passive and disaffected by their plights unless they factor into her schemes and goals. In one instance, Nell wanders into a churchyard where she lingers, with “a curious kind of pleasure” (133) among the graves. As she stands and reads the tombstone of a young man who had died fifty-five years earlier, Nell meets an old woman who recounts the sorrows of her life. After listening to the woman’s narrative of pain and love and grief, Nell returns to her grandfather with no mention whatsoever of her encounter nor is the reader provided with a thought report of how the woman’s story affected Nell because apparently it has not. In his discussion of death in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Kucich observe that the novel abounds in images of death that seem “to confirm the unimportance and futility of human life,” and that “loss only fascinates us when what is lost somehow matters” (63), which resonates with Nussbaum’s point that “compassion takes up not the actual point of view of any and every sufferer, but rather the point of view of an onlooker who appraises the seriousness of what has happened” (2001, 372).

Then there is case of the servant girl at the Valiant Soldier, a public house where Nell and her grandfather must take refuge one evening during a violent storm. As she prepares Nell’s bed, the girl “linger[s] a while to talk, and tell her grievances” (232)—her unhappiness, her suffering, her fears for her safety—and yet after she leaves the only thought report we have from Nell (after she leaves the room) is of concern for her own safety and well-being. Nussbaum wonders, “We see personlike shapes all around us; but how do we relate to them? All too often, we see them just as shapes, or physical objects in motion” (1998, 350). Characters such as this
unnamed servant girl are indeed “personlike shapes,” but their narrative fate is to wallow in obscurity. They are distanced from Nell’s perceptual field and subsequently become detached from the narrative because there is no imagining of similar possibilities and because of the eudaimonistic judgment—they do not factor into Nell’s schemes and goals. With these essential components to compassion missing—(along with the recognition that their suffering is undeserved)—such “backdrop” figures remain nameless and unattended, thus compromising their cognitive status and their importance in the mind of the reader.20 As Palmer suggests, “a character’s name is a space of a vacuum into which readers feel compelled to pour meaning; characteristics, dispositions, states of mind, causations. Readers take even the most apparently uninformative references to characters as cues to construct attributes and similarly, significance” (329). Ironically, the figures (the “distinguished effigies” and “waxen satellites”) in Mrs. Jarley’s exhibition are more sharply delineated and humanized—they all have names—than the individuals that Nell encounters. As Mrs. Jarley observes of her “real waxworks,” they are “so like life, that if wax-work only spoke and walked about, you’d hardly know the difference” (207).

Nell’s failure to attach is nowhere more in evidence than in the scenes of poverty and despair that she encounters in the Dante-esque Black Country where “[m]en, women, children, wan in their looks and ragged in attire, tended the engines, fed their tributary fires, begged upon the road, or scowled half-naked from the doorless houses” (339). Suffering even more acutely from hunger and the painful physical exertions of their endless journey, Nell goes up to one of the “wretched hovels by the wayside” and asks the occupants for “[c]harity” and is met with the most horrific of responses. Pointing to “a kind of bundle on the ground,” the man who answers the door explains that the bundle is “his third dead child, and last” (341). Even though the schoolmaster explains to Nell on her own deathbed that “nothing innocent or good, that dies . . . is forgotten” (408), we can see here and elsewhere how such assurances ring false. Along with five hundred other men, this man has been out of work for three months and they are all suffering from starvation and disease. Nell registers little reaction to this tragic scene (and the astounding lack of charity) except to “recoil” and then, “impelled by necessity,” she tries her luck at the next door. As it turns out, a number of poor families are all cohabiting in this small hovel, and as the door “yield[s] to the slight pressure of her hand,” Nell
finds herself witness to another scene of tragic desperation: The local magistrate has “compassionately” exonerated one woman’s son for theft because he is “deaf and dumb,” while the son of another woman who lives there was “transported” (to a penal colony) for the same offence. The desperate woman pleads for mercy and attempts to convince the official that “from his cradle,” her son was just as “deaf, dumb, and blind, to all that was good and right.” At the same time, she inveighs against the failure of the social system itself: where, she challenges, could her son have “learnt better? . . . who was there to teach him better, or where was it to be learnt?” (342). Despite the apparent emotional intensity of this scene, it barely registers in Nell’s thinking mind: she “had seen and heard enough to know that this was not a place at which to ask for alms. She led the old man softly from the door, and they pursued their journey” (344). Again, Nell appears to be cognizant of and affected by only those individuals who are necessary to her most immediate needs; faced with only hopeless prospects, misery, and distress, “objects appeared more dim [and] the noise less” (341). To paraphrase Mrs. Jarley, Nell is like a wax-work figure that walks about. As Margolin theorizes, “the wide array of kinds and types of mental functioning displayed in narrative fiction . . . suggests various views about its underlying features and regularities and enlarges, through example rather than theory, our sense of what it may mean to be human” (285).

While these scenes are undeniably bleak, and arguably the most blatant examples of social critique in the novel, Nell’s relative inattention to such profound and widespread human suffering is simply part of a pattern that is established at the outset of their journey. Consider the following scene, described from an omniscient perspective rather than transcribed from Nell’s thinking mind, that serves as a “backdrop”:

Damp rotten houses, many to let, many yet building, many half-built and mouldering away—lodgings, where it would be hard to tell which needed pity most, those who let or those who came to take—children, scantily fed and clothed, spread over every street, and sprawling in the dust—scolding mothers, stamping their slipshod feet with noisy threats upon the pavement—shabby fathers, hurrying with dispirited looks to the occupation which brought them “daily bread” and little more. (121)
Indeed, these “personlike shapes” are discarded and devalued before they are deported to the dark and marginal spaces of the narrative. Nell’s failure of curiosity—her failure to perceive them as part of the phenomenal world—is an implicit disavowal of their humanity as well as her own. According to Catherine Emmott, “Without an awareness of those around us and the impact of our actions on them, we become fundamentally asocial. Also, our ability to keep track of encounters in physical space provides the basis for our feeling of orientation, our assessment of the roles of others in our lives and our sense of identity” (316). As Nell and her grandfather make their way through “the labyrinth of men’s abodes . . . from which they could not fly too fast” (120–21), we must wonder if their journey is, in fact, a flight from humanity. Emmanuel Levinas argues that it is not only possible but of the highest exigency to understand one’s humanity through the humanity of others: “the signifying power of feeling . . . [is] a pathway leading to the other, leading to the human” (65–66).

Although Nell and her grandfather encounter a variety of people who demonstrate “a compassionate regard for her” (412), throughout much of their journey, there is one point when Nell and her grandfather join the ranks of those nameless figures crouching in odd corners. Having secured “passage” and traveled some distance on a barge manned by three “rugged, noisy fellows,” Nell and her grandfather are delivered to a wharf on the outskirts of “some great manufacturing town” (329). They seek shelter from the rain under a low archway, and Nell, suffering from “cold, wet, hunger, want of rest, and lack of any place in which to lay her aching head,” nonetheless musters up enough energy to “gaze upon the passing crowd with a wondering interest” in anticipation. This time, however, she is on the outside looking in; she is the victim of others’ perceptual blinders, a human throwaway: “No one passed who seemed to notice them, or to whom she durst appeal” (330).

The throng of people hurried by, in two opposite streams, with no symptom of cessation or exhaustion; intent upon their own affairs . . . while the two poor strangers, stunned and bewildered by the hurry they beheld but had not part in, looked mournfully on; feeling amidst the crowd a solitude which has no parallel but in the thirst of the shipwrecked mariner, who, tossed to and fro upon the billows
of a mighty ocean, his red eyes blinded by looking on the water which hems in on every side, has not one drop to cool his burning tongue. . . . They were but an atom, here, in a mountain heap of misery, the very sight which increased their hopelessness and suffering. (329–30)

Despite the irony of this situation, Nell sees it as an occasion for self-pity rather than self-reflection and, in all likelihood, this vision of a “poor, houseless, wandering, motherless child” (330) would have taken an emotional toll on many a Victorian reader. Nell and her grandfather’s status as human refuse—“lost in the crowd and hurry of [that] place” (331)—is, however, short-lived. As Nell and her grandfather find temporary shelter in a dark alcove, they are startled by the appearance of a dark figure who emerges from the shadows, a “form” of “a man, miserably clad and begrimed with smoke” whom they had not at first noticed. Though she shrieks and recoils from this savage-looking stranger, he is not to be mistaken for “the cruel people” whom Nell imagines to be lying in wait for her. Despite his gruff voice and his long dark hair, his expression, upon closer examination, is “neither ferocious nor cruel” (332). He soon joins the cadre of so-called grotesque others who are vital to Nell’s continued survival after she warily accepts his promise to find them a place of safety and warmth where they can spend the night. Despite this “uncouth protector’s” display of tenderness and compassion as he carries Nell, “showing himself both swift and sure of foot,” it is difficult not to register Nell’s disgust (and the narrator’s disgust) as he trudges through “what appeared to be the poorest and most wretched quarter of the town; not turning aside to avoid the overflowing kennels or running water-spouts, but holding his course” (332). As they are conducted through “a large and lofty building” that echoes with “the beating of hammers and roar of furnaces, mingled with the hissing of red-hot plunged in water, and a hundred strange unearthly noises never heard elsewhere” (333), our attention and concern is focused on the horrors that this environment presents for Nell, but not on the day-to-day horrors for those who work there, nor on the common vulnerability of all human beings:

. . . in this gloomy place, moving like demons among the flame and the smoke, dimly and fitfully seen, flushed and
tormented by the burning fires, and wielding great weapons, a faulty blow from any one of which must have crushed some workman’s skull, a number of men laboured like giants. Others, reposing on heaps of coals or ashes with their faces turned to the black vault above, slept or rested from their toil. (333)

The furnace man takes notice of and attends to Nell’s suffering and in exchange, Nell offers a caring regard. She worries that he might be ill and attentively listens to his story: From his infancy, this industrial orphan has been “nursed” before the “black vault” of this inferno; he never knew his mother—she literally “worked herself to death” (335)—and as a young boy, he witnessed his father’s death before the furnace. He explains to Nell why he was moved to help her: “when I saw you in the street tonight, you put me in mind of myself as I was after [my father] died, and made me wish to bring you to the old fire” (335). Much like Nell’s other benefactors, the wonder that she displays for the furnace man does occasion a more intimate knowledge of his suffering and misfortune; but his individualization—indeed, his humanization by Nell, like that of so many others, is incomplete and short-term. Nell is not motivated to do or say anything to relieve the furnace man’s distress and not surprisingly, she forgets to even ask his name, though she does “remember him in her prayers” (340). She fails to recognize that this other’s fate is intertwined with her own.

And what of the reader’s engagement with those others who populate the narrative borderlands? Why is it that we concern ourselves only with the trials and tribulations of named principals despite the fact that many novels, particularly those of the nineteenth-century realist tradition, usually include a robust cast of supporting characters? Why is it that some characters’ lives end for us not when we finish reading, as Peter Brooks has suggested, but simply after we have turned the page? If we unapologetically tend to focus our attention and concern on the characters who appear to move the plot forward—those story world participants who have cognitive status and remind us of their intention and “importance” by reappearing throughout the narrative—what are the narrative and ethical implications of ignoring those marginalized and nameless figures who remain “out of sight, out of mind”? Perhaps the skeptical literary critic might be inclined to dismiss this discussion of reading with blinders on as
obvious or unimportant; after all, our common sense of narrative includes so-called major and minor characters—the reason we don’t need to dwell on minor characters is because they are, we assume, inconsequential. Our interest, our attention, our experience of reading, is necessarily focused on a/the protagonist(s). Why wouldn’t they be? They are at the forefront of the “action” and we are driven to want to know what happens to them. Minor characters, on the other hand, are not as dynamic; they do not advance the plot. If we are not emotionally invested in them because they do not serve our readerly purposes and goals, is it possible that in some capacity, novel reading might very well contribute to a devolution of care? Could novel reading possibly program us to not care about those “inconsequential” figures lurking in our real life shadows? This supposition calls into question Nussbaum’s argument in Poetic Justice for the socially transformative power of reading fiction. According to Nussbaum, reading fiction can program people to care for one another, and while not offering the same argument for the possible adverse effects of novel reading as I do here, Suzanne Keen does offer, in her book Empathy and the Novel, a compelling investigation of narrative insufficiency when she challenges the efficacy of the connections that have been made between “novel reading, experiences of narrative empathy and altruistic action of behalf of real people” (xiv). Our lives, after all, are driven by narrative, and like any “good” story, our real-life stories have major and minor players. As Brooks points out, narrative “is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality” (xi). Just as in real life, we care about and are interested in those individuals who are, so we assume, significant to our own desires and plans, and who generate meaning in our world. But do we contribute to our own dehumanization when we live our lives with such blinders on?

While I have no definitive answers to these questions, I offer a hypothesis about the parallels we might draw between narrative selection and natural selection. For Joseph Carroll, the “central challenge for a specifically Darwinian form of literary criticism is to connect the highest levels in the organization of human nature with the most detailed and subtle aspects of literary meaning. Can we connect the basic life history goals—survival, growth, and reproduction—with the finest nuances of theme, tone, and style in the organization of literary meaning in specific works?” (189). I suggest here that curiosity about the phenomenal world is, like
Theory of Mind, an evolved cognitive capacity distinguished by its discriminating response to what is of value and importance; and that curiosity is driven by impulses that are both eudaimonistic and adaptive. According to evolutionary psychologists Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, we can better understand how the mind works if we approach it as an information-processing machine designed by natural selection to solve problems that occurred during our species’ evolutionary history. Specifically, the mind “contain[s] organized systems of inference that are specialized for solving various families of problems, such as social exchange, threat, coalitional relations, and mate choice” (166). As we have seen, the ways in which Nell engages (or disengages) with her environment—how she attends to (or “selects”) certain individuals or groups over others depending on their ability to help her—closely follows Darwin’s process of natural selection in which an “organism’s interaction with the environment . . . sets up a feedback process whereby nature ‘selects’ one design over another” on the basis of how well they function (Cosmides, Tooby, and Barkow 9). We can understand curiosity then, particularly its discerning aspect, as a design feature—an evolutionary perceptual process—designed to solve an adaptive problem. In Nell’s case, the problem is survival: she must avoid predation (initially in the form of Quilp) and also find food and shelter.

Curiosity might also be considered an example of what E.O. Wilson calls an “epigenetic rule”—a hereditary regularity in our brain structure and cognitive development that makes certain behaviors possible. Given this correlation between narrative selection and natural selection, I wonder about the extent to which we should be concerned with the discriminatory nature of curiosity, that (mal)adapted hierarchy of care. More specifically, we should wonder whether (a) that selectivity is a (mal)adapted or mutated design feature of our cognitive mental functioning; (b) how that design or epigenetic rule might replicated in (or spread through) the human population; and (c) what the implications are for that design or rule becoming universal to human nature (if it is not already). At the very least, the selectivity of curiosity contributes to those theories about the evolutionary logic of individual altruism. I am thinking here specifically of Dawkins’s theory of the “selfish gene”—a gene he identifies in a particular organism that will sometimes “assist replicas of itself that are sitting in other bodies” (88). Following Carroll, “We use imaginative models to
make sense of the world, not just to ‘understand’ it abstractly but to feel and perceive our own place in it—to see from the inside out. Making sense of the world in this way, through narrative . . . is both a primary psychological need and a necessary precondition for organizing our behavior in ways that satisfy all our other adaptive needs” (xxii). Thus, while the content of narrative fiction offers a variety of models of human experientiality, the form and structure of narrative fiction may non-consciously affect how readers perceive, categorize, and act in the real world. Paul Hernadi asserts that literature serves two functions: it “expand[s] the cognitive, emotive, and volitional horizons of human awareness . . . [and] integrates our beliefs, feelings, and desires within the fluid mentality required for survival in the increasingly complex and cultural environments of human organisms” (39). We need to investigate how the way we read novels—not simply how we experience novels—affects cognition, emotion, and volition. In other words, we need to move beyond discussions of how narrative reflects the human condition, to how it cognitively shapes the human condition. In other words, is it possible that the form of narrative fiction not only replicates, but strengthens our own perceptual blinders, despite Dickens’s valiant efforts throughout his career to write, as Cornelius Felton indicated, “from a profound sense of the woes of men, and a living sympathy with them” (215)? As Felton described Dickens’s humanism in 1843:

[T]he man of genius, who throws himself into the broad current of human sympathies . . . speaks to [his contemporaries] in manly tones of their duties to each other, and teaches them, that the poorest outcast, the most abject and friendless being, that ever passed through want and beggary to an unhonored grave, is still one of the universal brotherhood of man. . . . (216)

Though the narrator claims that Nell’s death leads us to a “universal Truth”—that from our tears “some good is born, some gentler nature comes” (543)—the real truth of the novel is that “mercy, charity, and love” are not universal, but rather meted out in selective and small doses to only those who are “deserving” of our attention.
“condemned to lie dead but conscious”

Such a reading as I have thus far outlined here seems to present an unflattering, if not blasphemous view of little Nell as more monstrous (as Swinburne saw her) than angelic, as a Hobbesian individual driven by her own selfish desires, rather than the needs of others. As I hope I have made clear however, my intention has not been in any way to disparage the novel that Dickens predicted he would always be most fond of, nor to expose his exemplary humanism as flawed or even fraudulent. Rather, I use The Old Curiosity Shop as a case study for speculating on the ways in which novels—or rather, the paradigmatic structure of the novels—work on us to create models for understanding and living in the world. To understand curiosity however—in fictional narrative and in real life—as a cognitive and behavioral adaptation designed to maximize genetic self-interest and as a function that is entirely hidden from our conscious experience is a rather pessimistic assessment of human nature. Following Peter Brooks’s suggestion that “[m]ost viable works of literature tell us something about how they are to be read, [and] guide us toward the conditions of their interpretation” (xii), I return again to the novel’s first chapter. Here, Master Humphrey draws our attention to the plight of an imaginary “sick man” who is cognizant of—indeed, perceptually besieged by—those shapeless others who pass beneath his window. His tragedy however is not a failure of curiosity—after all, “the task [that] he must perform” is his ongoing attempt to differentiate and individuate these faceless, nameless others. Rather, his tragedy is that he is afflicted with a curious attachment disorder; he is a narrative invalid, passive, inert, diseased—incapable of participating in the “stream of life”:

Think of a sick man in such a place as St. Martin’s Court, listening to the footsteps, and in the midst of pain and weariness obliged, despite himself (as though it were a task he must perform) to detect the child’s step from the man’s the slipshod beggar from the bootied exquisite, the lounging from the busy, the dull heel of the sauntering outcast from the quick treat of an expectant pleasure-seeker—think of the hum and noise always present to his senses, and of the stream of life, that will not stop, pouring on, on, on, through all his restless dreams, as if he were condemned to
lie dead but conscious, in a noisy churchyard, and had no hope of rest for centuries to come. (8)

To be cognizant of this “hum and noise” and yet to remain, in effect, a blind spectator, is nothing less than a death-in-life existence. That imaginary sick man may be condemned to “lie dead but conscious” but we have a choice. We need not cordon ourselves off, nor surround ourselves in darkness. After all, cognitive science posits that while there are “innate mental structures that have been determined by our formative evolution over thousands of generations . . . these structures are still mental and therefore not rigidly constrained like breathing, walking, metabolism, and so on” (Jackson 176). Recent discoveries in neurology, in fact, tell us that cortical networks in our brains are fluidly adaptive, meaning that they can be modified or “rewired.” Neuroplasticity thus affords us the capability of refocusing our attention and regulating how we respond to incoming stimuli; we can, in other words, reattach ourselves to the phenomenal world and reclaim our humanity. Like the man that Mr. Humphrey describes however, we have a “task” that we must perform: we must take care to apply a wide-angle lens to our own field of vision in order to bear witness and respond to the sufferings of others. To paraphrase Levinas, we must “lend” ourselves to the other (64–65). And though we probably did not pay attention to the misanthrope Codlin, one of the novel’s itinerant showmen, when we first encountered him, we might do well to listen to his “grumblings” more closely: “If you stood in front of the curtain and see the public’s faces as I do, you’d know human natur’ better” (130)

Notes

1. The first chapter of The Old Curiosity Shop began as a short story in the fourth number of Master Humphrey’s Clock, a periodical edited by Dickens. We can assume that the narrator is, in fact, “Mr. Humphrey,” though he is never named explicitly here. All subsequent references to The Old Curiosity Shop are to the 1999 Oxford World’s Classics edition.

2. In an early review of the novel, Hood described the introduction of Nell to be “like an Allegory of the peace and innocence of Childhood in the midst of Violence, Superstition, and all the hateful or hurtful Passions of the world” (284). Dickens may have
been responding to and correcting these remarks when he *added* the phrase “kind of allegory” in the first volume.

3. This is a widely-held assumption among cognitive narratologists. Hernadi observes that “our cognitive stance toward imagined worlds is similar to our cognitive stances toward historically reconstructed or personal experienced worlds” (30). And, as Carroll points out, “through literature . . . we recognize the elemental structures of human concerns in our own lives and in those of others” (116).

4. See for instance Ford, *Dickens and His Readers* 55–74, and MacPike, “‘The Old Curiosity Shape’” 33–38, 70–76.

5. Among the various meanings and nuances of the word “curiosity,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the first definition of curiosity as a personal attribute: “Carefulness, or the application of care or attention,” followed second by “Careful attention to detail; scrupulousness; exactness, accuracy.” Bowen also notes that that “curiosity” has the same Latin root as “care” (133).

6. In *Fictional Minds*, Palmer explores “how emotions link with cognition to produce mental functioning.” He explains that when emotions are “short-term, they are emotional events; medium-term, they tend to be called moods; as long-term states, they are closer in nature to dispositions” (114).

7. In *Upheavals of Thought*, Nussbaum follows and builds upon Aristotle’s account of compassion. For Nussbaum, compassion is not to be confused with empathy, which is the “imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience, without any particular evaluation of that experience” (301–2).

8. Jaffe has also noted the significance of a narrator motivated by curiosity in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, though her argument focuses on Dickens’s “insistent narratorial presence” and the ways in which his “assertions of omniscient knowledge and mobility, conflict with the ‘invisible’ demands of omniscient narration” (119).

9. Indeed, I disagree with Kucich’s somewhat absolutist claim that “[i]t is impossible to conceive of an unthreatened Nell” (63, my emphasis). Quilp does follow and spy on Nell; however, though Nell feels she is “hemmed in by a legion of Quilps” (212), he mainly hovers on the periphery. For example, when Nell wanders at night through the town where Mrs. Jarley’s caravan has made its first stop, Quilp appears under the town arch just as the moment on “what strange people it might have looked down upon . . . [and] how many murders might have been done, upon that silent spot” (211). Beyond his intimidating presence and undeniably malignant personality however, he poses no
overt threat of physical abduction or violation. Ironically, it is her grandfather’s gambling mania that has, all along, endangered Nell, including when he robs her of what little money she has at the Jem Groves Inn to continue his gambling spree. Kincaid, in fact, sees Nell’s irresponsible grandfather is “[d]irectly responsible for her death” and is thus “much closer even than Quilp to being the chief villain” (80).

10. Emmott explains that the “cognitive status” of a character is a hypothesis of the degree of prominence that a character has in a reader’s mind when a referring expression is used. Generally, “such theories focus on textual reasons why a character might be prominent (primarily whether the character has been recently mentioned) and they have not tended to look in any detail at social factors between the focalized and the focalizer” (297).

11. Palmer employs the term “non-conscious” to include images to which we do not attend or dispositions that are acquired through experience. He prefers this term to “unconscious” which he claims has limiting Freudian overtones and does not fully encompass unknown mental processes (104–5).

12. For Kincaid, however, Dickens surrounded Nell with “grotesque and wild” figures for comic effect. While pathos may be the dominant emotion of the novel, Kincaid argues, pathos is only made possible through humor. It is laughter “at the people Nell and her grandfather meet in their travels” that serves to “heighten the response to Nell’s sorrows and trials” (83).

13. Wilson explains that there “is no single stream of consciousness in which all information is brought together by an executive ego. There are instead multiple streams of activity, some of which contribute momentarily to conscious thought and then phase out” (120).

14. Following Damasio, I use the term feeling here to refer to “the private, mental experience of an emotion, while the term emotion refers to a range of publicly observable responses” (42).

15. One of the only instances in the novel where Nell does recognize and understand a shared sense of humanity is her peripheral encounter with the two sisters who are both “motherless and poor” (243). It is an illumination of similarities that triggers Nell’s attention to and concern for them: “following the two sisters at a humble distance, she felt in her sympathy with them and her recognition of their trials of something akin to her own loneliness of spirit, a comfort and a consolation” (315).

16. It makes perfect sense that the brain is designed for maximum efficiency; after all, if we did consciously weigh and deliberate each and every one of our intentional actions,
ultimately, we would accomplish almost nothing. Our cognitive mental functioning would effectively paralyze us.

17. Nussbaum points out, however, that “in a eudaimonistic theory, the actions, relations, and persons that are included in the conception are not all valued simply on account of some instrumental relation they bear to the agent’s satisfaction,” and not only “virtuous actions but also mutual relations of civic or personal love and friendship, in which the object is loved and benefited for his or her own sake, can qualify as constituent parts of a person’s eudaimonia” (2001, 32).

18. For an overview of why Nell’s death had such a profound emotional impact on the Victorians, see Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and His Triumph*, Kucich, “Death Worship Among the Victorians,” and Walsh, “Why We Wept for Little Nell.”

19. Gerard Manley Hopkins lodged a more muted complaint in 1888: reading *The Old Curiosity Shop* for the first time, he emphatically declared that he was unaffected by “any nonsense” about Little Nell (*Letters* 279). Similarly, G. K. Chesterton responded that, “It is not the death of Little Nell, but the life of Little Nell, that I object to” (see Chesterton vii–xvi). Even Daniel Maclise, one of the illustrators for the novel, revealed in a letter to John Forster that he found Nell (and other such girls her age) “most insipid” (qtd. in Turpin).

20. In her introduction to the 1999 Oxford edition of the novel, Brennan notes that “*The Old Curiosity Shop* is unique among Dickens’s novels in having a large proportion not only of unnamed characters, but of characters that are not named when they are first encountered” (xxv).

21. While Nell and her grandfather travel along the same route between Birmingham and Wolverhampton that Dickens and Forster took in 1840 (see Dickens, *Letters* 2:131–32), Dickens likely drew upon his experiences in Black Country in 1838 for this grim depiction here of the industrial city.

22. Margolin distinguishes between a *story world participant* as a “thinking agent” or “processor of information” and *character* as an individual personality with specific traits, attitudes, and dispositions” (283).

23. According to Wilson, human nature is made up of epigenetic rules from a variety of behavioral categories including preferences in taste, color vision, fear of snakes, and the personalization of inanimate objects, among countless others (178).

24. Cosmides, Tooby, and Barkow explain that in natural selection, a “design feature will spread only if it solves an adaptive problem better than existing alternatives” (9).
Further, “[i]f a change in an organism’s design allows it to outreproduce the alternative designs in the population, then that design change will become more common—it will be selected for. If this reproductive advantage continues, then over many generations that design change will spread through the population until all members of the species have it” (Cosmides and Tooby 176).

25. On his attachment to The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens wrote to Thomas Latimer, “I think I shall always like it better than anything I have done or may do” (Letters 2:233).

26. In exploring a range of works “from the golden age of narrative,” including Stendhal’s The Red and the Black, Dickens’s Great Expectations, and Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!, Brooks observes that “authors and their public apparently shared the conviction that plots were a viable and a necessary way of organizing and interpreting the world, and that in working out and working through plots, as writers and readers, they were engaged in a prime, irreducible act of understanding how human life acquires meaning” (xii).

Works Cited


This essay draws a great deal of its energy from the historical intersection of humanist psychology and education, as well as from a philosophically-oriented set of ecological insights whose elaboration by marine biologist Edward Ricketts in the 1930s and 1940s prefigures a later emphasis on “getting into contact” with lived realities. The humanist and Gestalt psychologists of the 1950s and 1960s—e.g., Paul Goodman, Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls, and Carl Rogers—provided the intellectual as well as practical ground from which such important developments as “confluent education” and the “live classroom” sprang.\(^1\) This “live classroom,” as George Isaac Brown dubbed it, is predicated on the understanding of the whole (or \textit{Gestalt}), on integrating emotion with cognition, on awareness (of self and other or object), and on experiencing through contact. What I will argue with respect to the shaping and flourishing of the B-student, or Being-student,\(^2\) is also founded on the Gestalt principle that learning about the world is only as important or as necessary as learning about how we prevent ourselves from doing so.\(^3\) So before exploring the meanings of terms and concepts such as confluent education and contact, I should emphasize that this essay itself, consistent with a Gestalt perspective, creates a need—the need for making change—at the same time that it interrogates possible obstacles to the natural emergence of this need. This double approach to need is the essence of what we might call B-learning.

That we are constantly preventing ourselves from learning, even while
seemingly engaged in its pursuit, is perhaps the most dramatic consequence of when contact is neglected in favor of indirect modes of investigating, being, and doing. The physicist Victor Weisskopf describes a poignant encounter with the wonder that is generated by direct contact with an object of study. When Weisskopf was invited to give a series of lectures at the University of Arizona at Tuscon, his enthusiasm for visiting the school was tied to his hope that he would be able to visit the Kitts Peak astronomical observatory. He was, however, duly informed that his wish to look at some objects through the telescope could not be granted because it was in constant use for photography and other research activities. Within days after declining the invitation, Weisskopf was told he would after all be able to look through the telescope:

We drove up the mountain on a wonderfully clear night. The stars and the Milky Way glistened intensely and seemed almost close enough to touch. I entered the cupola and told the technicians who ran the computer-activated telescope that I wanted to see Saturn and a number of the galaxies. It was a great pleasure to observe with my own eyes and with the utmost clarity all the details I had only seen on photographs before. As I looked at all that, I realized that the room had begun to fill with people, and one by one they too peeked into the telescope. I was told that these were astronomers attached to the observatory, but they had never before had the opportunity of looking directly at the objects of their investigations. I can only hope that this encounter made them realize the importance of such direct contacts. (qtd. in Kabat-Zinn 186–87)

A beautiful illustration of the emergence of a kind of live classroom, Weisskopf’s story reveals not only the value of contact but the way in which being “confluent,” being alive to both the affective and cognitive dimensions of the learning experience, produces an awareness of responsibility. Experiencing confluence means “being aware of, and taking responsibility for, yourself in relation to your experience and your context, people you’re interacting with, the topic and material you’re engaging in, group dynamics, and the environment” (J. Brown xvi). While the classical definition of confluent education emphasizes the integration, the flowing
together, of the emotional and the subject content elements of the educational experience so that both benefit from the relation to the other, George Isaac Brown was quite clear about what constitutes the dichotomy between the live classroom and the dead classroom. In short, this is the difference between education for biophiles and education for necrophiles (G. Brown 1975, 2).

B-students are biophiles who adopt a receptive, nonjudgmental, and reflective attitude toward their objects of study, and, by doing this avoid “separation from Being,” as Heidegger would call it. George Kneller has translated this Heideggerian notion into the realm of education: “Knowledge acquired by treating things as targets of inquiry yields power over them and corrupts the knower. Exploited intellectually and then technologically, things become a ‘standing reserve’ from which humans extract maximum advantage with minimum effort” (141). The consequences of not being mindfully present or in contact with the environment are grave: “Nature is despoiled, society disintegrates, and [we] no longer [are] the ‘shepherds of Being’” (Kneller 141).

The follies of scientistic education are becoming increasingly stark in an era subject to the normative and quantitative measurement of student performance. In a milieu of standardized testing, opportunities to be biophilic are squashed at every grade level, from elementary to post-secondary. From the right or the left, there is no shortage of criticism of U. S. colleges, which have been described as anywhere from utterly dysfunctional to merely “underachieving.” Former Harvard President Derek Bok, who prefers the latter label, critiques departmental majors for their lack of coherence, study abroad programs for being little more than vacations, and, most poignantly, faculty for ignoring research about which teaching methods are most effective. Bok, however, has no coherent vision of what the fundamental aim of higher education should be if it is to produce a different kind of student. Indeed, the best he can offer is to invoke a contemporary shibboleth—Critical Thinking—a term that apparently describes the ability to think through difficult problems. This decidedly instrumental goal is one that conceives of students as problem-solvers-in-training to be deployed into a society that will put them to work.

The humanities are no less instrumental than any other disciplinary field. Critical thinking still prevails in departments such as English and its subdisciplines, such as postcolonial, disability, or queer studies, which
ever-so-rarely enter into genuine dialogues with the living subjects of their inquiries. Once something like disability is translated into a metaphor used to make only theoretical points, once it becomes a piece of _au courant_ “crip theory,” the affective charge that the reality of disability has is all but extinguished.\(^5\) This affective charge, which Maslow locates at the heart of “fusion-knowledge” or “I-Thou knowledge,” is precisely the energy that drives change and the struggle for social justice (1966, 103–7, 112–14). Fusion-knowledge, as a mode of inquiry involving a merger with the object of study through care, is the modus operandi of the B-student. The B-student is thus a kind of action scientist (or humanist), committed to inquiry that fosters social change.\(^6\) From a pedagogical point of view, social change depends upon the flourishing of “affective empowerment” among B-students. Critical pedagogy’s commitment to affective empowerment is an antidote to the cynicism that cripples social action.\(^7\) The revolutionary and educator Paulo Freire has developed a transformative pedagogy whose counter-hegemonic stance puts into relief the lines between, for example, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, so that affectivities can be mobilized in the struggle against oppression.\(^8\) For Freire, the process of seeking meaning from experience, from direct contacts, and overcoming alienation is facilitated only through dialogue. Transfers of knowledge without mutuality, action, and self-awareness fail to produce the kinds of persons who will carry out the project of remaking society. The revolutionary potential of dialogue is one to which the B-student is especially alive.

The I-Thou Process: The Dialogic Center of Humanist/Gestalt Pedagogy

The most effective critical approach to model in a pedagogical setting (classroom, consulting room, or role play) is dialogue. Understanding the role of dialogue, or the I-Thou process, as it has been elaborated for example in Gestalt practice, necessitates a basic orientation to the role of the educator or, in a therapeutic setting, the group facilitator, whose mission it is to creatively facilitate contact, dialogue, and openness. In an early commentary about the role of the therapist/teacher in Gestalt group practice, Levin and Shepherd note that therapy amounts to “a microcosm of everyday life as it is the interaction, person to person, which forms the basis for
and process through which change occurs” (27). Of course, such a statement assumes that everyday life is a satisfactory model of, or rich field for, dialogic interaction between persons. There is compelling evidence to suggest that contemporary individuals are becoming increasingly isolated from one another, or, to put it another way, that “social capital,” predicated upon interaction between people in groups, is dwindling.9

Thus the core principle of Gestalt group practice, precisely the one central to humanist pedagogy, posits the centrality of dialogue, or the dialogic relation, as a remedy for “contactlessness.”10 The elements of “genuine dialogue”—the I-Thou process as it occurs between human beings, according to Martin Buber—are (1) presence, (2) genuine and unreserved communication, and (3) inclusion (see Buber 1923). In the classroom, as they become part of the group dynamic, these conditions are prerequisites for a dialogic student-teacher relationship. Briefly, they may be specified as follows:

- Presence—The most fundamental, yet most challenging, element is presence, as opposed to seeming. One is present when one does not try to influence the other to see oneself only according to one’s self-image. Presence involves bringing the fullness of oneself to an interaction.

- Genuine & Unreserved Communication—Within the context of being present, this is the injunction that participation in the dialogue be based upon a willingness to be honestly involved, and saying what one believes. This does not preclude silence, but silence must not serve to defend oneself or the other from self-expression.

- Inclusion & Confirmation—This involves a concrete imagining of the reality of the other in oneself, while still retaining one’s own self-identity. One is apprehended and acknowledged in one’s whole being.11 The experience of being “made present,” or included in the view of another, has powerful healing potential per se.12

The debt of the core of Gestalt practice, the I-Thou process, to the philosophy of Buber is profound. Indeed, citing Buber’s work as the most important influence on Gestalt practice, Erhard Doubrawa identifies the political implications of the I-Thou philosophy as an utopian model for revolution and a remedy for social problems. I-Thou is an opening up of
the social order to the possibilities of change. As Irving Yalom has summarized it, the problems addressed by Gestalt are age-old philosophical and ethical ones: “problems of existence, of self-awareness, of responsibility, of contingency, of wholeness both within one individual and within the individual’s social and physical universe” (443). To the extent that “human life,” as Georges Canguilhem suggests, “may have a biological sense, a social sense, and an existential sense” (155), I-Thou, as a primary mode of living, crosses all three areas, and may be summarized as: “all actual life is encounter” (Buber 1923, 62). As Buber would elaborate it a few years after publishing I and Thou: “The basic movement of the life of dialogue is the turning towards the other . . . [in which] this one person steps forth and becomes a presence (1926, 22).

The I-Thou process recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of dialogics, since both theoretical formulations concern how human beings relate to one another fully and responsibly. Bakhtin was introduced to Buber’s early work in his teens, and as some scholars have noted, there are striking similarities between Bakhtin’s concept of dialogics and Buber’s philosophy as outlined in I and Thou and Between Man and Man. Nina Perlina, for instance, reminds us that Bakhtin and Buber “belonged to the same cultural epoch” (26). The two theories richly overlap, with both emphasizing two principles that are hallmarks of humanist/Gestalt practice: the meeting and exploration of the phenomenological experiences of two people and dialogic contact. Both are ways of approaching the same issue: harnessing the potential for change that emerges from genuine interaction between two subjects.

A difficult term to define because it used by Bakhtin in multiple contexts, dialogics can be defined in a general sense as the simple act of dialogue, the give-and-take exchange of language between two individuals. While such a definition may seem quite obvious, dialogics, as Bakhtin describes it in a number of works, has radical implications when compared to traditional Western views of language. Clark and Holquist perhaps define dialogics best when describing the basic thrust of Bakhtin’s philosophy: “Bakhtin’s point is that I can mean what I say, but only indirectly, at a second remove, in words that I take and give back to the community according to the protocols it observes. My voice can mean, but only with others—at times in chorus, but at the best of times in dialogue” (12). While speech—to and with another—is always already embedded in and
marked by the norms of the social field, its potential value as force of change will occur at the local level, in dialogue.

**Pedagogy and the Value of Dialogue: The I and Thou in Action**

In the sections above, words such as “contact,” “the between,” “presence,” and “responsibility” are used to characterize the I-Thou, or dialogic, process. These are words that, for me, resonate with the work I did as a former professor of English and critical theory, both pedagogically and in my scholarly writing. One of reasons I invoke Bakhtin to buttress Buber as a point of origin for Gestalt theory is that, for me, Bakhtin’s theories were fundamental to the thinking I did around the question of what happens in that space between the “I” and the “you,” or between internal experience and environmental influence. My ethical sense is deeply informed by the notion of *the between*, that boundary event that amounts to a process of relational intentionality. Ethics, in my view, is predicated upon the notion of dialogic relationality—one thinks of Winnicott’s emphasis, in *Playing and Reality*, on what he called “spaces of play” (23)—the idea that we cannot really know “reality” in itself but only the part of it that we experience in the here and now. In other words, my sense of what is ethical is predicated upon thinking about the experience of contact and withdrawal as we interact with our environment. How we do that determines the place where the “I” and the “you” will arrive at a new truth.

One of the chief reasons I endorse so strongly this notion of dialogue and the I-Thou process is that in order to engage culture—e.g., ethnic culture, and those persons marked by class, gender, dis/ability, religion, and sexual preference—we must have a way of, a vocabulary for, thinking about how individuals make contact with others and then bring to awareness how contact can be hindered or enhanced. The I-Thou process is a concept that can be applied in order to explore one’s style of increasing and decreasing contact. It holds out the possibility for self-analysis with respect to how to bracket preconceived ideas, how to describe rather than interpret, how to be comfortable in a state of not-knowing, how to pay attention to the broader field, how to pay attention to the dialogic relation, and how to bring the process back to the “space between” self and other. Crucially, the I-Thou process forges, as a feminist theorist of race put it,
the “link between where one stands and what one perceives” (Frankenburg 8).

Over the years, I have had the privilege of teaching a number of Women’s Studies and sexuality courses, and one of the ideas that was central to my understanding of those who are different from me was the necessity of seeing the other person, in relation to myself and the group, within the broader context of culture, society, and the political system in which we operate. I have certainly personally experienced bewilderment about cross-cultural encounters and interactions, especially at so-called color and gender boundaries, while teaching. My experience parallels that of the Gestalt therapist Mark McConville who described how his “Well-Intended Whiteness” (3) was challenged as he became aware that well-intended actions could result, even if unintentionally, in hurt to another person. McConville pointed out the need to take responsibility for the impact of one’s own actions, no matter how well-intended they may be. One example from my own experience: the I-Thou process helps me understand cross-cultural encounters, bringing into focus, for instance, the invisible power of privileged people, of white male people, who are often seen as the norm against which everything else is measured. The I-Thou encounter, and that space between, allows for the opportunity to recognize my own assumptions and how much my worldview is shaped by, for example, my whiteness.15

My professional experience as a teacher, scholar, and now psychotherapist, especially in my continuing capacity as a leader of groups and classes, helps me urge others to question, and to question myself, the extent to which something like the privilege attached to whiteness (or cultural dominance) goes widely uninterrogated. One of the texts I perennially assign is Peggy McIntosh’s influential “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies.” In analyzing her own cultural privilege, McIntosh takes the approach that one has to start with oneself to investigate the privilege associated with one’s color and status. In the dialogic encounter, one must take responsibility for one’s own cultural position before being able to promote change. In short, the I-Thou process affords individuals and groups rich possibilities for engaging in the self-exploration that is the foundation of social justice. The I-Thou has the po-
potential to break down a self-conception of being the norm against which others are measured.

One caveat to bear in mind is that the I-Thou relationship may be particularly difficult for teachers who define their primary role as that of professional expert. Teachers who define themselves in such a way are erecting barriers that inhibit genuine dialogic interaction. For this reason, humility is at the core of the I-Thou, the same humility and non-defensiveness that underlie any true understanding of self, especially in relation to others. In the classroom, the I-Thou process is often dramatized by the facilitator’s one-on-one interactions with the group members. Perls described the real progress that can be accomplished when the I-Thou dialogue is working well between facilitator and group member: “It is always a deeply moving experience for the group and for me . . . to see previously robotized corpses begin to return to life, gain substance, begin the dance of abandonment and self-fulfillment” (15).

Dialogue, the I-Thou relation, is thus the active creation of contact, not the passive perception of a phenomenal field. In other words, through experiments and pieces of work with students, a teacher is able to establish contact in a mutually creative and interactive manner. A kind of co-created reality is generated through an I-Thou process whereby a shared “field” comes into existence. A fitting analogy is that of a dance since it shares with dialogue an emphasis on give and take: each dancer has a repertoire of preferred sequences, movements, rhythms, or steps. Two dancers create a dance together that is a product of each dancer’s creativity (and self-regulation, another key Gestalt concept) in light of the other dancer’s dance. At a particular time, the dance seems to “take over.” The dance, the field itself, starts to “regulate the dancers” (Parlett 76).

This may be exemplified in a classroom when the facilitator behaves as an authentic, real person acting in a horizontal relationship with the group members, rather than taking up the more vertical position of the professionally removed expert. What I-Thou underscores is the necessity of the facilitator not to stand outside of the relationship, but rather to co-create what happens within it. Gary Yontef has highlighted this aspect of the vital relationship, and underscored the value of presence, a feature of the live classroom that emerges, for example, when a teacher is engaged with the students even when they are silent. From a humanist-Gestalt point of view, silence is considered to be purposeful and reflected awareness—silence, in
other words, as the “fertile void” (a contribution from both Buddhism and Taoism). One dimension of experiencing the “fertile void” is attentively waiting in the silence or inviting the student to stay with the feeling of being at a loss to know “what to do next.” The idea here is to support the student in ways that can lead to a breakthrough in understanding the nature of things.

The Nature of Things: Speculations toward an Ecological Understanding of Social Organisms

For the B-student, the potential to grasp the nature of things, and the ways in which they function holistically, is tied to the ability to suspend knowing, to elude the pull of materialist description in order to linger in the space and time that precede action. The following two sections will explore, from a speculative angle, the necessity within academic practice to overcome a purely materialistic view of social process and systematicity. It will be my operating assumption that overcoming such a materialistic view means learning to see phenomena freshly, practicing a “way of seeing” and looking that is an active “thinking into” the nature of things themselves—not merely a measuring or assessing where facts, indeed the facta (the very things) of living, of life, are imprisoned in a world of hypotheticals and theoreticals. The process of “thinking into,” what Edward Ricketts and John Steinbeck, whom I discuss below, call “non-teleological thinking,” or “breaking through,” is an essentially inductive sensibility. In short, it holds that explanations of social reality are inadequate because they tend to reduce living wholes to their component parts. In place of explanations, understanding is sought, based as it is upon such crucial elements of seeing as context, connection or contact, relationship, and invisible field. Such an understanding demands an appreciative rather than a skeptical frame of mind; otherwise, it is not attainable.

The B-student will view work with social groups, organizations, and communities as demanding recognition of the life processes that underlie such social organisms. By way of illustrating this, I will highlight two features of groups and communities that are part of this ecological approach: attention to the biological soundness or unsoundness, or the health, of such organizations, and attention to the deep interconnectedness or organicity of social formations. Neither of these is normally emphasized in
the kind of “systems/ecological” framework typically called for in, for example, social work and social welfare practice. Indeed, as I will be claiming, too often social theory and ethics are mired in a materialistic, empirical mode of seeing, tending to look immediately for that which is most tangible. Then, having located those tangibles, the social or cultural scholar may intervene, approaching such tangible parts in a piecemeal fashion, as if they were discrete entities that can be remedied or changed on their own, perhaps with minimal effect on the system as a whole.

The B-student, however, 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. These relations have a rhythm all their own, and a healthiness that can be felt if not directly measured. In its systemic whole, the social organism is made up of fields and forces, dynamics and rhythms of power, qualities of leadership, senses of conflict or hierarchy, interplays of dependencies and independencies, and so on. Each of these can be characterized by its fundamental health, just as when sociological and socially- and politically-engaged psychoanalysts such as Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, or Karen Horney diagnose the sickness or neurosis of a social organism.

Healthiness, unhealthiness, rhythms, and silences are elements that act as force fields pervading the social organism, and they underlie the behaviors it manifests as well as the material and structural dimensions it assumes. Taken together, these are elements of the organism’s culture, that expression of its very being, which exudes a force permeating the whole even as it is made up of the complex interconnections and imbrications of health and sickness, rhythm and stagnation, time and space, noise and silence, and so on. One of the major implications of the sketch I will provide below of Ricketts’s thought is that effective work with social groups, for example, requires more than an ability to apprehend structures and procedures, or the humans-as-resources and material conditions. It requires, in addition, attention to the formative flows and force fields that permeate it. By way of illustration, this is especially crucial in the case of pedagogical leadership. John Heider offers a Taoist perspective on leadership:
Pay attention to silence. What is happening when nothing is happening in a group? That is the group field. Thirteen people sit in a circle, but it is the climate or the spirit in the center of the circle, where nothing is happening, that determines the nature of the group field. . . . People’s speech and actions are figural events. They give the group form and content. The silences and empty spaces, on the other hand, reveal the group’s essential mood, the context for everything that happens. That is the group field. (21)

Empty spaces and silences provide the context in which the group or class will behave. This shift away from the materialities of the group to its immaterialities does more than underscore the observation that group culture is more significant than a consideration of its structure. Rather, it emphasizes that every social organism, however small or temporary, is a novel instance of biopower striving to manifest its unique being, wrapped in particular social forms.

A Rickettsian View of the Organism

It was a somewhat obscure marine biologist and collector named Edward Ricketts, immortalized as “Doc,” the beer drinking philosopher-scientist in Steinbeck’s Cannery Row (1995), who is credited with founding the discipline of marine ecology.22 Ricketts approached the shores and tidal pools of the Pacific coast from the Gulf of California to Alaska with a perspective hitherto unknown in marine biology, a system predicated on “non-teleological thinking,” which rejected the very notion, with its origins in Aristotle, that nature reflected the purpose of an Almighty Creator. Ricketts classified an organism based not upon its inner structure, which is how scientific classification proceeded in the first half of the twentieth century, but rather on its relation to the outer world, its biotic and physical environment, on its ecology. Replacing the Linnean idea of a taxonomic pyramid built on the species-unit with Homo sapiens at its pinnacle, Ricketts put a holistic spin on relativity. “It seems apparent,” states a key passage in The Log from the Sea of Cortez, “that species are only commas in a sentence, that each species is at once the point and the base of a pyramid, that all life is relational to the point where an Einsteinian relativity seems to emerge” (216). If species were the commas, then their ecological rela-
tionships were the words that Ricketts would read to understand the biopsychosocial world. Ricketts devised an “ecological arrangement”—the distribution of marine invertebrates was determined by the interlocking factors of degree of wave shock, the type of bottom, and the tidal exposure—which has since been copied by numerous marine biology textbooks and seashore guides. It was a view of nature that looked significantly less like a hierarchical pyramid of species, and far more like an interconnected web of life.\footnote{23}

Maintaining the Linnean view of nature, a taxonomic system that is basically feudalism for animals, where social hierarchy determines that a higher species rules those below it, became very difficult in the face of changes to the social order brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The emergence in Europe of a laissez-faire ethic, class struggle, and competition for scarce resources is neatly reflected in the idea of the survival of the fittest—a Dickensian Weltanschauung that Darwin would also perceive in nature. During its seminal years (1850–1900), ecology was considered, even more than economics, the “dismal science” (Worster 114), focused on the struggle for existence. The economy of nature was, as Ricketts and Calvin wrote, truly “Victorian” (41). The turn of the century, however, marked a new era for ecology, one that gave rise to modern conservation in North America. The Progressive movement heralded a new spirit and generated new ideas required for understanding, and reforming, the function of complex industrial society. Thus ideas such as holism, cooperation, integration, and interdependence became the foundation of both the Progressive movement and the first American ecologists.\footnote{25}

A major shift in ecological thinking, and here the work of Ricketts is remarkable, occurred around the time of the Second World War. With the collapse of the laissez-faire economic order in the 1930s, the rise of fascist and communist regimes and industrialized warfare, ecologists began turning to nature for ethical guidance. Their disillusionment with humanity at a profound level, they began to explore the idea of using models of nature, of animal behavior, for instance, to understand humanity. A watershed moment occurred in 1938, the year Warder Clyde Allee, Rickett’s mentor when he was at the University of Chicago (even though Ricketts would never complete his degree), transferred his ecological discoveries to modern society in his treatise The Social Life of Animals. Allee concluded—prophetically, since a world war had not yet broken out—that “the present
system of international relations is biologically unsound” (158). Noting that “group struggles to the death between members of the same species, such as occur in human warfare, can hardly be found among non-human animals” (165), Allee proposed the creation of an international body to regulate competition and cooperation among nation-states, among them human societies. This direct application of principles derived from the natural order to human social existence is remarkable for its attention to what I called the “force fields” permeating social organization.

Remarkably, Ricketts’s careful work as a marine biologist and collector on the Pacific coast line provided opportunities to reflect on a growing rift in the human world as mirrored in animal communities. Ideological conflict, which Ricketts observed with the rising tide of totalitarianism, had an elemental parallel in the tide pool:

Even the two chief philosophies of human society are paralleled on the shore: those dedicated to the principle that the individual serves the state, chiefly as a unit or cog in that supra-personal social organization that is the colony; and those based on the democratic principle that the state serves the all-important individual. The latter are exemplified by the octopus and by other actively predacious animals which, by their individual skill through intelligence and sensory ability, function as free entities (1939, 35).

Ricketts, who endured the hardship and misery of the Great Depression and witnessed the inconceivable brutality of two mass wars, was indelibly marked by these events, and he became intent upon searching not just for a greater understanding of marine animal life, but also an ecological basis for human ethics. He grew convinced that his discoveries in the tidal pools could help restore balance in a traumatized world.

Throughout the late 1930s, Ricketts would refine his thoughts about the interconnectedness of animal and human life into a full-blown philosophical program. I will highlight one of the main elements of that philosophy, non-teleological thinking, in order to speculate, beyond the Rickettsian view, about the nature of organizations. Summarized in what became known as the “Sunday Sermon” of the *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, which he co-wrote with John Steinbeck, non-teleological thinking
was defined as an antidote to the predominant Aristotelian mode of scientific thinking, namely, the idea that knowledge of a thing, beyond its classification and description, requires an explanation of causality, or why it exists. Everything, according to this view, has an ultimate purpose. Non-teleological thinking, on the other hand, Ricketts wrote, “concerns itself not primarily with what should be or could be or might be, but, rather, with what actually ‘is,’ attempting at most to answer the questions what or how, instead of why” (1995, 356). He argued that teleological thought tended to divide the world into good and bad, right and wrong, and that this was a profoundly moralizing and didactic way of apprehending the world. Non-teleological thinking, by contrast, allowed the dualities of the world to dissolve into oneness, revealing hidden truths with clarity. It was predicated upon acceptance and understanding. “The whole is necessarily everything,” he wrote, “the whole world of fact and fancy, body and psyche, physical fact and spiritual truth, individual and collective, life and death, macrocosm and microcosm, conscious and unconscious, subject and object” (1995, 355). Ricketts’s investment in eastern philosophy, particularly the Taoist notion of “quietism,” or what the Zen Buddhists call “radical empiricism,” is especially clear here.26

Among Ricketts’s most cherished books was a copy of D. T. Suzuki’s Essays in Zen Buddhism, which, in 1933, was one of the first texts to introduce the philosophy to an English-speaking audience.27 Suzuki’s description of Buddha as one who “took life and the world as they were and did not try to read them according to his own interpretation” (16) described a model of interacting with the world that harmonized well with the lines of Ricketts’s own thinking. This way of encountering the world has the potential to produce satori, or enlightenment:

Satori may be defined as an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradiction to the analytical or logical understanding of it. Practically, it means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistically-trained mind. . . . All its opposites and contradictions are united and harmonized into a consistent organic whole. . . . With the removal of the obstruction, a new vista opens before one, boundless in expanse. (Suzuki 140)
Ricketts named this moment of reaching the nature of things “breaking through,” and it would become the subject of an essay entitled “The Philosophy of ‘Breaking Through’.” What Ricketts, by way of eastern philosophy, identified as essential to seeing how the world is organized in ways that transcend dualities and polarities, is a holistic mode of consciousness, and one that is more appropriate than the analytical mode for observing life, wholeness, and underlying processes.

If we carry this over to an analysis of social organizations, to organisms in their field, the implications are rich, especially in the area of ethics. Holistic seeing is, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, a kind of understanding that consists in the fact that we see the connections, and, furthermore, as Wittgenstein recognized, the idea is not so much to search for new theories as it is to develop a new kind of seeing. Seeing connections directly and simultaneously perceiving the whole is something that can be learned, at least according to the recent sciences of physics and perception. Put simply, the idea is that we affect what we see by what we are looking for. Recent science says something like this: the particle (separate and discrete, and so small that it has virtually no extension) is also seen as a wave (which can extend to infinity and be entirely penetrated by other entities) depending on what we are looking for. In short, the act of observation changes what is observed. The ethical implication of this is that, because we are participants in our world’s unfolding and not simply onlookers, we are part of what we observe, and thus affect both it and ourselves. So if we look “bureaucratically” at the world, we look only for superficiality, for efficiency, for number, for structure, for the discrete object. As a result, we create a world devoid of the invisible currents of life, wholeness, and meaning since we will have reduced the world to inanimate things. Observation is thus a moral act, as Ricketts understood so well.

For seeing social organisms themselves, and for seeing how lives and collective systems are deeply imbricated, what this humanistic approach to the unified field or Gestalt implies is an active embracing of what is not always immediately measurable or able to be parsed. This essay has been urging a fresh way of looking at the world, one that the B-student practices with mastery. 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. The questions that circulate around
an object of inquiry for the B-student are at once ecological, social, and existential: What are the positive and negative implications of regarding oneself as the creator of one’s own destiny (i.e., having a high internal locus of control)? Does one act according to principle or expediency? Are the social relations within which one is enmeshed healthy or unhealthy? Perhaps most importantly, how is learning tied to relevance, action, and change? Framed inductively, these questions, and others like them, are the kinds one asks in order to perceive the character of the total social organism, always bearing in mind how, like tidal pool life and human life, one organism may reflect the other.

Notes

1. The full humanist roots of confluent education are often neglected in favor of a focus on Gestalt therapy, which, given its geographic center at Esalen, where Fritz Perls taught and where George Isaac Brown, whose name is consonant with confluent education, received the major Ford Foundation grant for the Ford-Esalen Project in Affec-

tive Education, provided an important conceptual language to rethink education. The classic texts are G. Brown, *Human Teaching for Human Learning*, and G. Brown, ed., *The Live Classroom*. In addition to the influence of Gestalt, texts such as Goodman’s *Compulsory Mis-education*, and essays such as Maslow’s “Goals and Implications of Humanistic Education,” and Rogers’s “Significant Learning: In Therapy and in Edu-
cation” are important.

2. The term “Being-student” owes its formulation to Maslow, who, since his early work on the scientific study of transcendent experience in the 1950s, was convinced that the English language is insufficiently descriptive of the higher life. He found what he believed was a way to discuss the range of exalted emotional experiences, such as euphoria, ecstasy, reverie, and wonder, in his Being-psychology. Maslow outlined a num-
ber of “Being” elements: for example, universal Being-values (or B-values), which included, among the seventeen he initially identified, truth, beauty, justice, aliveness, and self-sufficiency, and Being-cognition (B-cognition). B-values and B-cognition, Maslow believed, describe key dimensions of self-actualizing persons. My term “B-
students” is meant, then, to allude to a student of life’s experiences whose central pro-
ject may be best described as self-actualization. See Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*.

3. See McCarthy 47.
4. With K-12 schools reevaluating their investments in laptops, it is becoming apparent that technologies, whose justification has been increased state test scores, are either not generating the desired scores or undermining the learning experience (“the art of thinking is being lost,” remarked one teacher). See Hu, “Seeing No Progress.”

5. See, for example, McRuer for an egregious example of theory for theory’s sake.

6. Lewin is recognized as the founder of action science (see Lewin, “Group Dynamics”).

7. Compare with Grossberg: “Affective empowerment is increasingly important in a world in which pessimism has become common sense, in which people increasingly feel incapable of making a difference, and in which differences increasingly seem not to matter, not to make any difference. Affective relations are, at least potentially, the condition for the optimism, invigoration and passion which are necessary for any struggle to change the world” (86).


9. See, for example, Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

10. A prevalent theme among humanist psychologists, “contactlessness” was theorized following the thought of Wilhelm Reich who, in the 1930s, originated the term “contactlessness,” and which extends to May in the 1960s, who described “schizoid culture” (see May, *Love and Will*).

11. See Buber, *Between Man and Man*.

12. These points are drawn from the wonderful discussion of dialogue provided by Jacobs, “Dialogue in Gestalt Theory,” especially 40–52.

13. See Clark and Holquist 27.

14. See Morson and Emerson 49.

15. I recall my own gestures toward working out an ethics of racial and gender difference in the introduction I wrote to *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, where I drew upon recent work on the ethics of performativity to suggest that a true ethics must emerge in the space between the constative and the performative, between what is and what will be.

17. See Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.


19. Such a view of how things, living and nonliving, are to be apprehended harmonizes with Buber’s emphasis on creating relationships outside a context of means: “Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur” (1923, 63).

20. See, for example, Heffernan, Shuttlesworth, and Ambrosino.


23. See Ricketts and Calvin, *Between Pacific Tides*.

24. Eric Tamm has written a fine biography of Ricketts, to which I am indebted in terms of some of my formulations concerning the history of ecology and Ricketts’s relation to that history; see Tamm, *Beyond the Outer Shores*.

25. The important originary text along these lines for Perls, and hence Gestalt theory, is Smuts, *Holism and Evolution*.


27. The place of Zen, with Suzuki as spokesman, in humanistic psychology and the formulation of a new ethics based on it, is dramatized in Maslow’s *New Knowledge in Human Values* with Suzuki’s contribution, “Human Values in Zen” 94–106.

28. See, for example, Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature* 301.

29. See, for example, Jacoby, *The Bureaucratization of the World*, and Hummel, *The Bureaucratic Experience*.

**Works Cited**


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