
Book Review Essay
Becoming human

Suzanne Conklin Akbari

Department of English, University of Toronto/University College, Toronto.

postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2010) **1**, 272–289.
doi:10.1057/pmed.2010.7

C.W. Bynum

Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, xix + 402pp.
32 b + w plates, \$24.95.

ISBN: 0812220196

J.J. Cohen

Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles.
New York, Palgrave, 2006, viii + 256pp, \$90.00.

ISBN: 140396971X

N. Giffney and M.J. Hird (eds.)

Queering the Non/Human. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008, xxviii + 384pp, \$99.95.

ISBN: 0754671283

D. Heller-Roazen

The Inner Touch: Archeology of a Sensation. New York, Zone Books, 2007,
386pp, \$34.95.

ISBN: 1890951765

E.A. Joy and C.M. Neufeld (eds.)

Premodern to Modern Humanisms: The BABEL Project. 2007, Special issue of
Journal of Narrative Theory 37.2, 189pp, \$8.00.

The state of being human has become difficult to pin down. Earlier ages had an easier time separating the human from the non-human – that is, the animal, thought to be of a lower nature, lacking both the power of reason and an immortal soul. Modern views of the human are both more complex and more urgently expressed: non-human humanity, so to speak, can be found not only



among the many life forms that share our planet but also among conjectural non-human inhabitants of other worlds, as well as among those products of modern technology whose thought and emotional affect make them, if not precisely human, something disturbingly close to it. This uncertainty and urgency motivates both the larger aims of the inaugural issue of *postmedieval* and this review essay in particular, in which I discuss three noteworthy manifestations of what we might call the ‘turn to the human’ in medieval cultural studies, and then address two very different books that might help us to think through the productive problem of the human.

It is helpful to begin by separating out two frames of reference for the human in western thought, one theological and one philosophical: that is, *humanitas*, the quality of being human that becomes an attribute of the divine with the Incarnation of Christ; and *homo*, man conceived in Aristotelian terms as the rational animal. These two frames of reference implicitly construct a hierarchy within which identities are clearly distinguished, yet share a common ground: God is above man, but God and man are united in the person of Christ; man is above the animals, but man and animal both have a soul that animates (Latin *anima*) the body. Medieval writers spilled much ink in the effort to explain Christ’s human nature and to specify the relationship of the human and the divine. While we might think of such fusion as a form of hybridity or even monstrosity, early Christian writers instead wanted to define the nature of that fusion as precisely as possible: the complex debates that ensued culminated in the doctrine of the hypostatic union, which teaches that the nature of God and the nature of man are both present in Christ not just as abstract categories, but as actual substance.¹

The equally elaborate late medieval debates concerning the nature of the presence of Christ’s blood and flesh in the Eucharist similarly insisted on not just categorical presence but actual, substantial presence: both bread and flesh were equally present in the moment of transubstantiation. The human thus appeared in the theological frame of reference as a state of being, one that was proper to mankind, but could be taken on by other forms of being – in particular, by the divine. Significantly, the assumption of the human by the divine was understood to integrate the fullness of humanity into Christ: his feminine nature, expressed most cogently in the notion of Jesus as mother but also apparent in his fundamental attribute of humility (conceived of as a feminine virtue), was as fully expressed as his masculine nature. To put it another way, mankind in both genders comprised the *humanitas* of Christ.²

But this was just one of two possible overarching frameworks within which medieval people might think about human nature. The theological concept of *humanitas* had as its counterpart the philosophical concept of *homo*: that is, man as the rational animal. Within this framework, the human was similar to so-called lower beings in having a soul (*anima*) that ‘animates’ the body, but was additionally endowed with the power of reason. ‘Power’ is exactly the right

1 On the hypostatic union, see Adams (1999) and, for a more provocative account of medieval Aristotelian views of the hypostatic union, see Adams (2006, 108–143) (chap. 5: ‘Recovering the Metaphysics: Christ as God-man, Metaphysically Construed’).

2 On the presence of both male and female humanity in Christ, see Bynum (1991, 79–117).



term here, for it is through the exercise of reason that man is able to control both himself and his surroundings. Again, 'man,' in the gender-specific sense, is the right term, because within the Aristotelian framework, woman is simply an imperfect or incomplete man, conceived with the potential of developing into an adult male, but never achieving that potential. Medical and scientific writings often reinforced this model of gender by way of the so-called 'one sex' model which remained popular throughout the Middle Ages in spite of the competition from more practical, empirical Galenic theories of sex differences.³

3 See Cadden (1993, 105–165) (chap. 3: 'Academic Questions: Female and Male in Scholastic Medicine and Natural Philosophy').

It is helpful to keep in mind these two pre-modern modes of categorizing the human – one theological, one philosophical; one based on how man differs from what is above him (God), one based on how man differs from what is below him (the animal) – when we take stock of recent work on the human, humanity and the humanities. Out of the abundance of wonderfully stimulating work that has appeared along these lines, I have chosen three books (Cohen, 2006; Joy and Neufeld, 2007; Giffney and Hird, 2008) that represent significant points in the development of the conversation around the human. I say 'conversation' because so much of this scholarship characterizes itself in the tone of dialogue and exchange, insisting on the fundamentally collaborative nature of the undertaking. That said, if there is one figure in medieval literary studies who can be singled out in the wider effort to foreground the human, it is Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, whose *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain* is among the books reviewed here. Cohen's effort to define the human has always been indirect, defining it not affirmatively but by negation, contrasting it particularly with the monstrous and the hybrid. The human is what is left when that which is inhuman – the Other – is identified and abjected; or, it is the norm from which a being deviates when it is a monster; or, it is a partial state of being that is incorporated within the hybrid. Cohen's work, not only in this volume but in his many other publications (which include, in addition to monographs and edited collections, blogs and other vehicles for collaborative engagement), has done a great deal to focus attention on the problem of the human, and the impact of this work is particularly visible in the two collections of essays reviewed here: Giffney and Hird's *Queering the Non/Human* and Joy and Neufeld's *Premodern to Modern Humanisms: The BABEL Project*.

In *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity*, Cohen focuses particularly on twelfth-century Britain, exploring the nexus of ethnic, religious and bodily difference in a range of texts both literary and historical, ranging from the travel writing of Gerald of Wales and saints' lives of Thomas of Monmouth to the chronicles of William of Malmesbury and Geoffrey of Monmouth. The book's crucial importance lies in its identification of the space of hybridity (adapting Bhabha's definition in *The Location of Culture* [Cohen, 2006, 180, n.10]) as a 'difficult middle,' a term that Cohen uses to describe 'medial spaces' that are both 'difficult to articulate, and difficult to inhabit' (Cohen, 2006, 2). The 'difficult middle' can refer to actual geographical borders, whether they appear in



documentary evidence of the lived world of the historical past, in the imaginative digressions incorporated within a medieval chronicle, or in the fantastical realm of poetic invention. Simultaneously, however, the ‘difficult middle’ is not just a geographical but an ontological space, marking out the state of being in between. This appears, for example, in an episode of Gerald of Wales’s *Journey through Wales* which Cohen describes as ‘an intriguing meditation on ... dual nature or difficult middles’ (Cohen, 2006, 98). Similarly, in his study of the complex social and cultural context that informs Thomas of Monmouth’s *Life of St William*, Cohen illustrates how the conflicted city of Norwich is ‘transformed against its will into ... a compound and postcolonial difficult middle’ (Cohen, 2006, 112); a little later, this same phenomenon is explicitly characterized in terms of hybridity, so that Thomas’s Norwich is identified as ‘a hybrid space, a difficult middle’ (Cohen, 2006, 175), as if these two things were completely synonymous or, at least, interchangeable. The ‘difficult’ nature of this middle – a productive difficulty, to be sure – lies in its indeterminacy, which itself arises from the fluid nature of hybridity which Cohen takes care to emphasize: ‘hybridity is not some third term that synthesizes two warring elements and renders them placid. Hybridity tends to remain a tumultuous, conflicted state’ (Cohen, 2006, 144–145).

To focus on the difficulty of the middle, however, or on the tumultuous conflict of hybridity is to lose sight of the often violent teleological impulse of many medieval texts. For example, the blobby ‘flesh’ that is born as a result of the marital union of white Christian princess and ‘black and loathly’ Saracen sultan in the *King of Tars* is inevitably transformed into the perfect, white, male, animate body following its immersion in the baptismal font, while the irascible and aggressive Saracen princess Floripas inexorably moves toward the climax of baptism and assimilation in the *Roman de Fierabras*.⁴ This is not to undermine Cohen’s deeply significant emphasis on the ‘warring elements’ within hybridity, but rather to draw attention to their own embeddedness within a narrative of being that has as its endpoint integration, assimilation, and even – sometimes – annihilation. A further refinement that might be brought to bear upon Cohen’s treatment of hybridity concerns the apparent elasticity of the term. While the state of the ‘difficult middle’ is sometimes defined as hybridity, it is also often defined as monstrosity, and these two variations are not always distinguished as sharply as they might be. The monster is ‘a defiantly intermixed figure that is in the end simply the most startling incarnation of hybridity made flesh’ (Cohen, 2006, 6), while other forms of racial, ethnic and religious alterity are also integrated within the category of monstrous hybridity, including ‘Jews, barbarians, and other human monsters’ (Cohen, 2006, 9). In spite of these limitations, the alignment of geographical border with ontological border central to Cohen’s work has proved to be a powerful spur to other efforts to identify the nature of the pre-modern human, and to interrogate its relationship to the marginal.

This focus on the marginal is particularly evident in Giffney and Hird’s *Queering the Non/Human*, for which Cohen provides an Afterword whimsically

4 See Akbari (2009, 155–199) (chap. 4: ‘The Saracen Body’).

titled 'An Unfinished Conversation About Glowing Green Bunnies.' The collaborative model that Cohen has done so much to nourish is evident in the origins of the Afterword, which is an adaptation of a blog post by Cohen plus comments by readers: he describes this effort as a tribute to the 'vectors' of *Queering the Non/Human*, that is, 'movements away from traditional networks of authority and singular forms of identity' (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 363, n. 1). The collaborative nature of Giffney and Hird's enterprise is a natural outgrowth of their overarching topic, which is a problematization – a 'queering' – of the human, understood both affirmatively (*Human*) and through negation (*Non/Human*). The diffuseness of the topic is mirrored in the model of interpretation, an approach which is at times extremely successful, as in Robert Mills's 'Queering the Un/Godly: Christ's Humanities and Medieval Sexualities,' which builds upon Mills's earlier work on 'Jesus as Monster' (Mills, 2003), not in order to generate a definitive account of Christ, humanity, or sexuality, but rather to illustrate how 'constructions of humanity and monstrosity may offer alternative yardsticks with which to measure the medieval queer to the normatively heterosexual' (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 116). While such an effort implicitly relies upon binary oppositions of human and monster, queer and heterosexual, Mills takes care to resist the tendency 'to reify the opposition between these categories,' instead seeking to 'open up pathways to queerly proliferating, nonhuman pasts as well as futures' (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 117). In the undertaking to disrupt, problematize and trouble conventional modes of knowing, Mills's essay is representative of the strikingly diverse collection contained in *Queering the Non/Human*, which consistently interrogates the boundaries, both ontological and epistemological, that gather around the category of the human. Some of the most provocative essays extend this effort into the temporal realm, as in Giffney's own fascinating study of 'Queer Apocal(o)ptic/ism: The Death Drive and the Human.' Here, the teleology of the death drive serves as a modality for making visible the Queer, which 'serves as an uncanny reminder of the death drive nestling within heteronormativity' (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 72). The moment of impact that punctuates the apocalyptic is transmuted, in Giffney's essay, into 'the ontology Queer itself,' with its 'relentless questioning of all categorical imperatives' (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 57). The suspension of time is shifted into the epistemological realm, resulting in a suspension of knowing – that is, indeterminacy.

What *Queering the Non/Human* sets out to do, it does well. But it leaves the reader hungry for an engagement with the past, an effort to take account of the relationship of past and present that does not simply elide the two with a 'queer touch,' to paraphrase Dinshaw's influential formulation (Dinshaw, 1999). It is striking that Cohen closes the Afterword ('Green Bunnies') to the volume by inviting precisely this engagement with the temporal: 'What are the limits of the human? How has that category changed throughout history? ... How heavily does the past weigh upon the future?' (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 372). This



longing for a fuller engagement with the relationship of the past to the present (and, maybe, the future) is satisfied by the essays in Joy and Neufeld's *Premodern to Modern Humanisms: The BABEL Project*. Foregrounding the distinction between modernity and what lies behind it – the pre-modern – creates a kind of metanarrative through which the various essays engage with the productive problem of the human. The editors' explicit aim is 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"' (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 170). In some ways, this is a deeply pragmatic effort: university faculty members have found themselves obliged to articulate the value of studying the medieval past more now than at any time since, perhaps, the marshalling of medieval history and philology in the service of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European nation-building.⁵ Beyond that local threat to medieval studies, on a broader scale the humanities themselves are, as it were, 'under siege.' Yet this pragmatic aspect of the BABEL project is only part of the story: the essays collected by Joy and Neufeld also seek to articulate the relationship of present and past, acknowledging that the human is not a static state of being but rather 'an open-ended and mutable process' (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 173). The terms 'human,' 'humanity' and 'humanism' continue to be useful, Joy and Neufeld suggest, 'not because they are meaningful ideas or states of affairs *in and of themselves* ... but because we believe we need these terms' in order to articulate '*what we think we may be* at any given moment' (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 174; emphasis in original). 'At any given moment': here we have some purchase on the relationship of past and present, making use of the local foothold of the moment in time.

While the essays collected in *Premodern to Modern Humanisms* are almost entirely written by medievalists, they do not limit themselves to engagement with medieval texts alone: Myra Seaman's reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, for example, is an extraordinarily sensitive meditation on the limits of the human in a way that reads the modern novel against the backdrop of pre-modern conceptualizations of body and identity, while Robin Norris's study of modern death rituals associated with the Iraq War in the context of mourning behaviors found in Old English poetry is insightful and deeply poignant. Like Giffney and Hird, Joy and Neufeld acknowledge the influence of Cohen's work, especially his notion of hybridity (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 171). For Joy and Neufeld, however, the human is itself a state of hybridity, of indeterminate being and therefore fundamentally unknowable. Several of the essays make an explicit effort to articulate the nature of the human through the non-human, whether through the technological genesis of the clone or cyborg, or through that which medieval readers would have recognized as the non-human: that is, the animal. Perhaps the most striking figure for the human/non-human, appearing a number of times both in Joy and Neufeld's collection, as in that of Giffney and Hird, is

5 On nationalist histories, see Blurton (2009); on nationalist philology, see Mallette (2005, 233–252) and Mallette (2010).



the werewolf, whose rational mind and animal body simultaneously divide and unite the two natures of man and beast. In the BABEL volume, both Birrer and Seaman invoke the figure of the werewolf, though Birrer's effort to situate him (for it is almost always a 'him') in a pre-modern/postmodern framework is much less successful than Seaman's. For Birrer, the werewolf is a pre-modern limit point, marking the moment when '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' (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 218; compare with 241, n. 1); this is a terrible oversimplification that severely limits the possibilities of the reading of *William of Palerne* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that follows.

Seaman, by contrast, focuses on how the figure of the werewolf in Marie de France's *Bisclavret* can help us to understand not 'the human,' as if it were a stable category of being, but 'what people mean by "the human" in a given place and time' (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 250). Seaman suggests that 'the posthuman,' originally introduced as a way of describing 'a hybrid that is a more developed, more advanced, or more powerful version of the existing self' (like a clone, a cyborg, a vampire, and so on), can be identified in the medieval context – at least analogically – in the notion of Christ as being both God and man. She argues that medieval people 'examined and extended their selfhood through a blend of the embodied self with something seemingly external to it' – namely, Christ (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 250). Seaman then turns to the werewolf which, following Cohen, she identifies as an example of the posthuman, a manifestation of 'the medieval imagination' within which 'the human body was commonly blended with the non-human' (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 251). As Seaman herself points out, however, this is not so much a state of blending as a state of dual identity: medieval werewolf stories 'demonstrate the resistance of the supposedly essential human self to full absorption into non-humanness' (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 251). Seaman suggests that the stability of human identity in a text such as Marie de France's *Bisclavret* is rooted in medieval conceptions of the divine: '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' (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 254). This reading of the pre-modern notion of the human as being grounded in Christ's assumption of human nature seems to me exactly right; the identification of Christ's nature as both God and man as being a state of hybridity, on the other hand, may be more problematic.

The dual framework with which we began, in which the philosophical notion of *homo* as the rational animal has as its counterpart the theological notion of *humanitas*, one aspect of the dual nature of Christ, has been complicated and problematized in the work reviewed here so far. We have seen the concept of hybridity, in particular, used as a way to represent the state of being that is in



between two states of being – what Cohen, in his more recent work, describes as a ‘difficult middle,’ in the ontological (as opposed to geographical) sense. I want now to push harder on that ‘difficult middle,’ and explore how philosophical and historical approaches to the problem of the human can help us – not to erase the difficulty – but to observe its nature more clearly. We have seen that pre-modern texts locate human nature by defining what is above it (the divine) and what is below it (the animal). Christ, partaking equally in both divine and human natures, is (according to Christian understandings of hypostasis) simultaneously completely God and completely man. This is precisely *not* a state of hybridity, which is predicated on ‘blending,’ ‘flux,’ ‘conflict’ and – worst of all – ‘shape-shifting.’ This does not mean that it is not useful to think of the Incarnation in terms of hybridity, simply that medieval people would not think of it that way. We can infer that, just as they thought of Christ’s state of being as comprised of total divine being plus total human being, so too Marie’s readers would think of the werewolf as being comprised of total human being plus total animal being. Since, in the Aristotelian framework, man already has total animal being (because he is the rational animal, separated from lower animals simply by the power of his mind), the werewolf has always (even when he was a man, before his original transformation) fully participated in animal being. In this respect, the werewolf differs from the Son of God, who takes on human being only at the time of the Incarnation. To put it another way, the werewolf is always already two things at once; Christ becomes two things at once, and that moment is the temporal hinge of sacred history.

We cannot know ‘the human’ directly. Instead, we can try to demarcate its borders by getting a clearer sense of the ‘difficult middle,’ both the one that is situated between divine and human nature, and the one that is situated between human and animal nature. To do this, it is helpful to turn to two recent studies: Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Wonderful Blood* and Daniel Heller-Roazen’s *The Inner Touch*. Neither of these explicitly claims to address the human, but both of them nonetheless address what we might want to call difficult middles – though neither Bynum nor Heller-Roazen call them by this name. These difficult middles are instead called ‘blood’ and ‘touch,’ the fluid that flows through the body and the sensation that flows through the soul. These two books thus come at the difficult middle from two very different directions, that is, by way of the body and by way of the soul. In addition, they approach the problem from two completely different methodological angles, one from the discipline of religious history, one from philosophy. This methodological difference is of tremendous importance to the temporal dimension of the effort to locate human nature, because while Bynum’s approach assumes at most an analogical relationship between the past and the present, Heller-Roazen’s work is predicated on the ability of philosophy to step outside of the framework of historical diachrony.⁶

Like Giffney and Hird’s *Queering the Non/Human*, *The Inner Touch* is structured in a way that purposely deviates from the conventions of a scholarly

6 On Bynum’s view of the ‘analogical’ relation of past and



present, see Bynum (1995, 1–23); discussion in Akbari (2004, 242–243).

book. The final chapter, ‘Untouchable,’ is subtitled ‘An End to the Work, containing what the Reader may, perhaps, expect to find in it.’ If ‘it’ refers to the ‘Work,’ this concluding chapter becomes a kind of introduction or table of contents, teaching the reader what he or she might find in the text. If, however, ‘it’ refers to the ‘End,’ the subtitle is an invitation to consider the very contingency of all knowledge: it signals not just the multiple ends that are implicitly possible (*An End*), but also the role played by the reader’s expectation concerning what one might expect to find in a conclusion (Truth? Something like truth?) and, above all, the embedded ‘perhaps.’ While Giffney and Hird juxtapose voices into a ‘polylogue’ (Giffney and Hird, 2008, 7) that ‘queerly’ approaches the topic of the human/non-human, Heller-Roazen constructs a monologic text that nonetheless evades stability through a *Tristram Shandy*-like concatenation of loosely related chapters that lead, inexorably, to the beginning.

Heller-Roazen focuses particularly on ‘the thinking animal,’ beginning with a meditation on Murr, the furry protagonist of Hoffman’s *Opinions of Murr the Cat*. He addresses Aristotle’s definition of man as the rational animal, focusing particularly on the complex middle ground that separates human nature from animal nature: ‘even when human nature and animal nature have been most strenuously distinguished, a region in which they cannot be told apart has continued to recur,’ a region that Heller-Roazen suggests we call ‘human animal nature’ (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 92). It is noteworthy that Heller-Roazen repeatedly has recourse to topographical language (‘region’) to denominate the ontological state that Cohen calls a ‘difficult middle.’ He argues that ‘the possession of reason,’ far from being the quality that defines the state of being human, actually leaves behind it a ‘remainder’ made up of all ‘that is left over once one has withdrawn’ that which ‘is particularly human.’ It is this element that Heller-Roazen identifies as ‘a region common, by definition, to all animal life’: that is, ‘sensation,’ or *aisthesis* (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 93). He argues that, for Aristotle and his earliest followers, the boundary between the human and the animal was much less sharply drawn than it would be by Christian commentators in the early Middle Ages, for whom ‘the sense of sensing’ would come to be supplanted by the rational faculty, so that ‘the possessor of reason’ would ultimately ‘claim for himself the elements of a nature once held in common’ (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 98). Similarly, while the Stoics would insist that reason created a ‘gulf’ separating man, who has the power of speech, from the mute beasts, they too conceived of a level of ‘awareness’ shared by all living beings that leads them to exercise self-preservation (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 105, 109). Heller-Roazen asks whether we may not identify this with ‘consciousness’ (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 110) and, following Seneca, even with ‘sensation.’ This is a limited form of knowledge, to be sure, but knowledge nonetheless: ‘an animal does not know what it is to be animal, but still it feels itself to be one’ (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 113).



With Augustine, the demotion of the animal takes place, as Augustine combines the perceptive faculty of ‘sensation’ described by Aristotle with the animal ‘awareness’ of the Stoics into a single faculty that is proper to all animals, including man: he calls it ‘the inner sense’ or, more exactly, ‘the more inner sense’ (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 136). While Heller-Roazen acknowledges that Augustine ‘insists repeatedly on the importance of separating the intellect of man from the perceptual powers of animals,’ he argues that ‘the positing of two distinct lives’ – intellectual and perceptive – ‘would fracture the thinking animal at its core, dividing it to a point at which it could hardly be said to be one’ (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 138, 140). Moving into the Arabic and Persian traditions of faculty psychology, Heller-Roazen traces the development of the theory of five ‘internal senses’ corresponding to the five external senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 145–146), and subsequently of the ‘common sense’ that gathers together the traces of external sensation and makes them available to the workings of the mind. While this ‘common sense’ cannot be identified with the ‘sensation’ described by Aristotle or the ‘awareness’ of the Stoics, it shares with them the property of being intermediate, of linking mind and body, and being situated ‘at the limit between the twin sections of the bipartite soul: the corporeal and the incorporeal, the external and the internal, the sensible and the intellectual,’ where it serves as a kind of ‘threshold between all the senses’ (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 147). By the time we get to Avicenna and, still more, Albertus Magnus, this ‘common sense’ has traveled far from its ambiguous Aristotelian and Stoic origins: for Avicenna, the common sense has the power of illumination, while for Albert, in his commentary on the *De anima*, it is a universalizing conduit that anchors all perception within the soul (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 155, 158–160). With Descartes, we find a definition of the mind so fully rooted in the power of reason that it has ‘erected an insurmountable barrier’ (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 165) to a more holistic pan-animal theory of sensation.

If I have made Heller-Roazen’s account of sensation sound overstudied or tedious, that is my fault and not his. The book is full of witty and poetic excursions, on dogs and cats, on shellfish and birds, on manuscript fragments and tales told during the *Thousand and One Nights*; the reader has to work hard to extract a scholarly thesis from the poetic fragments assembled in *The Inner Touch*. Heller-Roazen’s argument, if we can call it that, proceeds by juxtaposition rather than through the assembly of a scaffolding of logical propositions. It is allusive rather than dogmatic, and seeks to trace out the ‘archeology’ promised in the book’s subtitle rather than to stake out a polemical position. In spite of the chronological expansiveness of the sources treated, from the Peripatetics through Leibnitz, Locke, and a host of later medical and scientific writings, the reader is left, in the book’s final chapter (‘Untouchable’), with a synchronic meditation on touch. While the weight of western tradition rests firmly upon the sense of vision as being the highest of the senses, Heller-Roazen



points out the tendency of certain early writers to place special emphasis on mankind's power of touch (*tauton*), and turns to Merleau-Ponty to elaborate a fuller theory of what a form of knowing based upon the sense of touch might entail. On the one hand, one might conclude that touch, like thought itself, has 'no proper object, no clear organ of operation, and no medium to call its own' (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 295). On the other hand, following Merleau-Ponty, one might find that, in a tactile act, 'the touching and the touched "do not coincide"' because some medium persistently separates the 'two tactile terms': that is, 'the untouchable' (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 296). Only one outlet remains, therefore, through which the living being – the animal – can both perceive and know, but which is nonetheless not fully apprehended by any one faculty. This is the same outlet enjoyed by Murr the Cat and Aristotle the Philosopher, namely, 'the fact of the living being's own existence' which is, for both cat and man, 'a source of joy' (Heller-Roazen, 2007, 297).

There is a playful pleasure to be found in the act of reading *The Inner Touch*, a sense that the river of sensation flows seamlessly from its ancient origins in Athens to the purring animal sitting on one's lap. But it is difficult to push away the nagging sense that many different modes of defining sensation are here being loosely juxtaposed in order to create, not a narrative, but a semblance of a narrative which has as its aim the recuperation of a notion of the human that does not wall us off from the animal, that provides for a common ground whose borders remain comfortably indeterminate, even – dare I say it – fuzzy, like the soft fur of Murr. Similarly, the synoptic concluding chapter marries together a number of different terms for and modes of conceptualizing the sense of touch as if they all described the same common sensory ground; while the sense of touch was theorized in much less elaborate detail than the sense of sight, which is almost always the paradigm of all of the senses in medieval scientific and philosophical texts, it nonetheless was conceptualized in different ways at different times. It is thus profoundly ironic that the MLA's citation of *The Inner Touch* for the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize in 2008 particularly recognized the book's 'steely diachronic spine'; there is a spine, but its steel is supple and flexible, more like the shimmering scales of a fish than the vertebrae of an amphibian.

The playful synchrony of *The Inner Touch* is utterly at odds with the careful diachrony of Bynum's *Wonderful Blood*, which seeks at once to produce a closely focused local study of late medieval blood piety in northern Germany and to generate a broader view of medieval Christian theology and devotional practice. For the purposes of this essay, the value of Bynum's book lies in its deep, intricate engagement with the theology of Christ's humanity, and the ways in which his united divinity and humanity were made visible to the devout through the miraculous presence of holy blood, whether in the miraculous form of blood relic or in the real presence of the Eucharist. That presence is mediated, above all, through the power of vision, although the other senses also



participate in the act of devotion; moreover, the experience of Christ is both individual and communal, as each worshipper is united with Christ and the community as a whole is united through the sacrifice of the Eucharist, both consuming and becoming part of the body of Christ. In some ways, *Wonderful Blood* continues Bynum's earlier work on medieval views of Christ, especially *Jesus as Mother* (Bynum, 1982) and several of the essays in *Fragmentation and Redemption* (1991), yet it also marks a significant departure, especially in its effort to redress perceived limitations in her methodology. For example, in response to criticisms that her use of images of medieval art in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (Bynum, 1987) failed to situate the art object in its proper context, as a different form of evidence from that found in theological texts and historical documents, Bynum engages with images on a far more nuanced level in *Wonderful Blood*; in response to a perceived tendency to overlook the concomitant role of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, she foregrounds the ways in which medieval Jewish impiety was thought to precipitate the miraculous appearance of Christ's blood as cult relic, and the consequences of that role for community formation and exclusion; and, perhaps most strikingly, she engages with objects in a thoughtful and provocative way, exploring the local environments and tangible objects associated with the cult. These last two aspects of *Wonderful Blood* were foreshadowed in a recent essay titled 'The Presence of Objects' (Bynum, 2004), in which Bynum discusses a series of artifacts pertaining to German anti-Judaism kept in storage in Berlin's Jewish Museum, and considers the ways in which historiography and object come together in the effort to remember the past.

Wonderful Blood is divided into four parts: a detailed account of the blood cult at Wilsnack, centered on a miraculously bleeding host, and several related cult sites in northern Germany; a learned summary of scholastic debates concerning the nature of that blood, focusing particularly on the largely opposing positions of the Franciscans and the Dominicans; a study of the ways in which blood was understood in medieval thought and represented in medieval art, including its ability to be simultaneously divided and whole, quantifiable and singular; and, finally, a provocative exploration of the role of sacrifice in Christian theology. The liquid blood visible to the devout in the host at Wilsnack, as at other cult sites, was more than a reminder of the sacrifice of the Crucifixion: it was thought to be the living blood of Christ himself. Needless to say, this proposition was extremely dangerous, with the potential to disrupt ecclesiastical structures of authority, both regionally and locally. To avoid the question of the validity of the blood relic, some bishops ordered that a consecrated Eucharist be displayed alongside the miraculously bleeding wafer, to ensure that Christ's blood – one way or another – was certainly the object of adoration. Franciscans and Dominicans debated whether or not this red substance was merely a 'stain' of some kind or the actual flowing blood of Christ, with the former generally concluding that it was indeed Christ's blood



(though the presence of the blood drops on earth in no way detracted from Christ's fundamental unity and integrity), and the latter that it could not be, because the blood that redeems mankind can do so only if it remains united to divinity (that is, not remaining behind on earth). It may be helpful to give just one example from the range of theologically intricate positions put forth in the debate, all of which are explained by Bynum with remarkable clarity: the Franciscan Johannes Bremer distinguishes between the way in which Christ's human nature is manifested in the blood relic and the way in which it is manifested in the Eucharist, stating that blood relics 'are something of the humanity of Christ and were joined to the divinity,' while consecrated hosts in the service of the Mass 'are greatest and most precious because they are united in the *supposito divino* by the act of divinity' (Bynum, 2007, 40). In other words, the blood of the relic *was* joined to Christ's divinity, and remains joined to his humanity; the blood of the Eucharist *remains* joined to both his humanity and his divinity, and hence is 'most precious.'

The Franciscan and Dominican debate concerning blood relics illuminates theological positions on Christ's humanity – and, indirectly, on the nature of humanity itself – with remarkable variety. While Dominicans thought that blood constituted *veritas humanae naturae*, 'true' (or as Bynum puts it, 'core') 'human nature,' and therefore Christ's blood almost certainly could not be left behind on earth, Franciscans thought that some portion of the blood might not be essential to Christ's human nature, and therefore were more open to believing that some 'inessential bits might be on earth' (Bynum, 2007, 128).⁷ Both agreed, however, on the need to ground their arguments, first, in the definition of human nature and, second, in a clear explanation of the ways in which and the time at which humanity was united with divinity in Christ. This was not just a singular moment that took place at the time of the Incarnation, when the Word was made flesh, but also a relationship of human and divine natures that might have had to be renegotiated during the three days following the Crucifixion, when the human body (but not the human nature) was dead, and following the Resurrection, when the human flesh arose in a glorified state.

The intricacy and specificity of these arguments can be helpful to our own efforts to think through what constitutes the human, not as a model to be followed slavishly but rather as a set of ontological categories that might serve as a framework for understanding pre-modern conceptions of the human. Because the medieval blood cult described by Bynum was both the topic of learned scholastic debate and the object of popular devotion, it offers us insights into the pre-modern human from a range of perspectives, from the university to the cloister to the pilgrimage site. The power of the blood left behind was a visible reminder not just of Christ's humanity but of the promise extended to all human beings who, through the Incarnation and Crucifixion, were redeemed from sin. It was crucial to define human nature both in order to articulate the individual status of each member (each human being) within the body of

7 I have simplified the Dominican and Franciscan positions here; see Bynum's synoptic summary of the positions in *Wonderful Blood*, 127–130, and the fuller account at 85–131.



Christ, and to articulate the relationship of all of those members in their role as the community of the faithful, whose incorporate nature was expressed and performed through the Eucharist. This salvation, however, came at a great price: Christians believed that ‘Christ quite literally incorporates all humankind in his death and resurrection,’ and therefore that ‘what is offered to God in the death of Christ is not merely one man as a substitute for many but all humanity subsumed in Christ’ (Bynum, 2007, 202). This is an important point: the unification of God and man in Christ is not singular, as in the model of the hybrid, but collective, which is necessary for his sacrificial death to bring salvation to all.

Sacrifice is the focus of the last section of *Wonderful Blood*, and it is here that Bynum makes perhaps her most significant contributions to the ongoing effort to take stock of the sometimes dizzying gap between pre-modern and postmodern visions of the human. While the death of Christ was thought to take place at the hands of the Jews, they were thought to commit sin rather than to offer a sacrifice; this was not simply an expression of intentionality (they did not intend to make a sacrifice but to kill) but rather an indication of the incapability of mankind to pay the price that needed to be paid. No human being could make this sacrifice: instead, Christ himself would be both victim and priest, both offered and offering. Bynum shows how this view of sacrifice was expressed by medieval Christians who saw their own ability as being restricted to ‘offering,’ so that while in the scriptural context sacrifice ‘clearly entails reciprocity or gift-exchange,’ sacrifice on the part of humans merely refers to ‘the act of renouncing or giving something up’ (Bynum, 2007, 237). Debates on the part of theologians concerning whether the Mass was a reenactment of the Crucifixion or a commemoration of an event that was, by definition, singular reveal a fundamental problem concerning ‘the repeatability of sacrifice’ (Bynum, 2007, 245), played out visibly on the bloody hosts adored by the eager crowds at Wilsnack. The Crucifixion, instead of the Incarnation, was increasingly identified as ‘the moment of salvation,’ becoming the object of devotion for those who sought to understand, whether intellectually or affectively, ‘how the unchangeable omnipotent could meet humanity,’ and asking ‘How can the eternal reside in time and matter?’ (Bynum, 2007, 255, 253, 254).

This turn to temporality and the place of sacrifice – understood not only in spatial but also in temporal terms – offers an implicit critique of recent scholarly attempts to identify the role of sacrifice in medieval efforts to police the boundaries separating the human from the non-human. For example, in *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity*, Cohen describes how Thomas of Monmouth’s *Life of St William* ‘attempts to perform a purification, purging the city of hybridity and lasting difference by embodying all that is intolerable in the homicidal Jews’ (Cohen, 2006, 9). How might we distinguish between the ‘purification’ carried out in Norwich and the purification achieved through sacrifice? Cohen goes on



to highlight the ways in which the story of the (apparently) forced circumcision of a Norwich child ‘vividly illustrates the complicated connections between communal identity and body in the Middle Ages.’ These connections, for Cohen, are articulated through the medium of blood: ‘To speak about blood is to speak of human corporeality, of our existence as embodied creatures. As a substance and as a metonymy for bodiliness itself, blood gives being its solidity, binding personhood to flesh’ (Cohen, 2006, 15). In some ways, the role of blood in unifying and dividing communities so evocatively described in *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity* seems to draw upon the same symbolic systems outlined in Bynum’s *Wonderful Blood*: at the same time, one longs for a fuller engagement in Cohen’s work with the specific understandings of how blood was used – repeatedly, in the sacrifice of the Mass – both to unify and to exclude, through the medium of an individual being (Christ) whose dual nature at once participated in humankind and comprised all of humanity within it.

Sacrifice is repeatedly required of the posthuman, as Seaman shows in her beautiful reading of Ishiguro, in which several clones, produced for the sole purpose of serving as organ donors, ultimately ‘make a ... selfless sacrifice.’ What they must sacrifice, of course, is their lives, and through this act they express most fully their humanity and, in particular, their capacity for love. Through ceasing to be, they become fully human. As Seaman puts it, ‘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’ (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 267). Through love, sacrifice becomes possible; and the consequent expression of the love that arises from sacrifice, through the act of mourning, provides a linkage that can extend across borders of time as well as space. In her exquisite essay on rituals for the Iraq War dead and Old English poetry, Norris describes this outpouring as a ‘contagious mourning’ that is able to link past and present through the medium of language: ‘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’ (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 277).

Through sacrifice, the human comes into being. Several of the works reviewed here incorporate this gradualist notion of humanity, one that describes it as less a state of being than a state of becoming. In their introduction, Joy and Neufeld invoke Deleuze and Guattari’s influential formulation of a ‘project of becoming,’ centered on the notion of the BwO (body without organs). The BwO is, by definition, ‘never an achieved state. It is, according to the political theorist Jane Bennett, a multispecied and ongoing project of becoming in which new links are forged BwO is a creature that hovers between human and nonhuman being, between who-ness and it-ness’ (quoted in Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 182–83, n. 5). A similar formulation can be found in Seaman’s essay, where she argues that the replacement of being by becoming is *the* fundamental



element of posthumanism: 'Posthumanism rejects the assumed universalism and exceptional *being* of Enlightenment humanism and in its place substitutes mutation, variation, and becoming' (Joy and Neufeld, 2007, 247). If we turn to thickly historicized work such as Bynum's *Wonderful Blood*, we may find fruitful avenues to explore concerning how medieval people also turned from being to becoming in their effort to identify the 'true human nature' of Christ and, hence, their own natures. The ontological categories of the Enlightenment cannot be projected back onto a medieval past that focused relentlessly on the ways in which unchangeable eternity pressed up against the mutable secular life of the human, not just in the singular event of the Incarnation but also in the daily, weekly, or annual rituals of the Mass. Christ's human nature begins at a certain point in time, with the Incarnation, and undergoes changes in its status and in its union with divine nature over the period separating the Crucifixion from the Resurrection. In some ways, the dual human-divine nature of Christ resembles that of other medieval hybrids, like the werewolf. As we noted earlier, however, the werewolf has always (within Aristotelian categories of being) had animal nature, even during his time as a man before his initial transformation; Christ, by contrast, initially has only divine nature that does not partake of human nature.

The story of the Incarnation is the story of becoming human, a story that might be a fitting pre-modern backdrop to postmodern stories of becoming posthuman, from the self-sacrificing clones of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* to the heroine of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga. Bella rises up after enduring days of excruciating pain and the 'blackness of nonexistence' in order to preserve the life of her child, 'to hold on to her until she was strong enough to live without me' (Meyer, 2008, 374, 375). This sacrificial act is both an inversion of the role of Mary, whose own suffering lies in her witnessing the pain of her suffering child, and an imitation of Christ who labors in the Passion to achieve mankind's spiritual rebirth. When she becomes posthuman, Bella is at first estranged from herself, looking in a mirror at 'the alien creature in the glass' who resembles nothing so much as 'a carving of a goddess' (Meyer, 2008, 403). This figure is not initially recognizable as herself, but the image gradually changes from 'the stranger in the mirror' to 'the woman in the mirror,' to 'the beautiful woman with the terrifying eyes,' and then, finally, 'the strange and beautiful woman in the mirror' (Meyer, 2008, 404-406). This visual estrangement gives way to self-recognition when Bella looks back on her human life as a time when 'I just did the best with what I had, never quite fitting into my world' (Meyer, 2008, 523). She finally realizes that, 'now,' she is 'amazing': 'It was like I had been born to be a vampire I had found my true place in the world' (Meyer, 2008, 524). Becoming posthuman, for Bella, is coming into her true nature; yet this nature preserves elements of her human nature in elusive traces like the 'familiar little flaw' of an upper lip that is 'a bit too full to match the lower,' or her own



eye color reflected in the eyes of her child (Meyer, 2008, 405, 429). In this, the posthuman does not resemble Christ, who takes on an additional, lower nature in becoming human; instead, she moves into a higher nature, in a kind of metamorphosis or apotheosis. She becomes ‘indisputably beautiful’ (Meyer, 2008, 403), so that her name – Bella – comes to correspond with her being, in a return to the Edenic correspondence of word and thing. It’s no wonder that her boyfriend has the face of an angel.

About the Author

Suzanne Conklin Akbari is Professor of English and Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto. She is interested in how literature intersects with intellectual history and philosophy, and has written about optics and allegory in *Seeing Through the Veil* (Toronto, 2004), views of Islam and the Orient in *Idols in the East* (Cornell, 2009), and travel literature in *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West* (Toronto, 2008). She is currently writing *Small Change: Metaphor and Metamorphosis in Chaucer and Christine de Pizan* and editing the medieval volume of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*.

References

- Adams, M.M. 1999. *What Sort of Human Nature? Medieval Philosophy and the Systematics of Christology*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press.
- Adams, M.M. 2006. *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Akbari, S.C. 2004. *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Akbari, S.C. 2009. *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Blurton, H. 2009. An American in Paris: Charles Homer Haskins at the Paris Peace Conference. In *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of ‘the Middle Ages’ Outside Europe*, eds. K. Davis and N. Altschul. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bynum, C.W. 1982. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bynum, C.W. 1987. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bynum, C.W. 1991. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone Books.
- Bynum, C.W. 1995. Why All This Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective. *Critical Inquiry* 22: 1–23.
- Bynum, C.W. 2004. The Presence of Objects: Medieval Anti-Judaism in Modern Germany. *Common Knowledge* 10: 1–32.



-
- Cadden, J. 1993. *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dinshaw, C. 1999. *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mallette, K. 2005. Orientalism and the Nineteenth-Century Nationalist: Michele Amari, Ernest Renan, and 1848. *Romanic Review* 96: 233–252.
- Mallette, K. 2010. *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean: Toward a New Philology and a Counter-Orientalism*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Meyer, S. 2008. *Breaking Dawn*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Mills, R. 2003. Jesus as Monster. In *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, eds. B. Bildhauer and R. Mills, 28–54. Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press.