Compass Interdisciplinary
Virtual Conference

2009

Reading *Beowulf* in the Rubble of Grozny: Pre/modern, Post/human, and the Question of Being-Together

EILEEN A. JOY
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Part I The Petrified Unrest of History's Ruins

Consider this photograph of Grozny, Chechnya taken in 1995 after repeated bombing campaigns by Russian forces. I ran across this in 2001 after I became intrigued by news reports of female suicide bombers in Chechnya and Russia. I didn't know anything about the Russian-Chechen wars, and looking at the photograph, I felt as if I had been carried back to Dresden, Germany at the end of World War II. The scene carried for me a particular shock, since I was viewing it just after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. At this time, I was also reading and thinking about some lines very early on in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, when the poet tells the reader, long before Beowulf travels to the great Danish hall Heorot in order to save it from Grendel, that the hall "awaited hostile flames" and "it was not long yet before the sword-hate of those sworn to each other should awaken after the war."[1] So, long before Beowulf hurries over the sea to rescue the Danes from their monstrous

[1] In the Old English: "heaðowylma bad, / laðan liges; ne wæs hit lenge þa gen, / þæt se ecghete aþumsweoran æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde" (cited from *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Friedrich Klaeber, 3rd ed. with supplements [Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1950], ll. 82–85.

enemies, the great hall is, in a sense, already destroyed, and Beowulf travels over the waves to a future that is already history—and the main marker of that history is the shadow of a ruin, the bare outlines of which body forth the ashen memory of a once-golden kingdom. It was as if the *Beowulf*-poet was trying to tell us that in every image of a glittering city lies coiled the architecture of its apocalypse. And the lines speak as well to what feels like a fundamental element of human history: constant war. It is not the Other who comes seeking our destruction in the end; it is ourselves.

Consider, also, the photograph of two women and one child walking through what is left of the streets of Grozny in 1995. This picture haunts our own future—contained in the picture of every modern city is this negative image of its inevitable destruction—and it also recalls us to the past of so many other cities (both fictional and real) destroyed or almost destroyed in war: Troy, Carthage, Alexandria, Rome, London, Dresden. Although the photographer chose to center his three subjects within the frame of his lens, which is also the frame of the present moment when he and his subjects came together in an instant of time, we cannot help but notice that they are moving from one end of the street to the other, and therefore they are always arriving from the past while also disappearing into the future. And while the witness, who is also an artist, may wish to wrest his figures from the flow of time, or to stop time, there is a restless movement here that might reveal to us, if we are willing to see it, the "petrified unrest" of history's ruins.

Part II The Disappeared

From December 1994 through January 1995, and again in August 1996, Russia launched bombing campaigns against Grozny as part of its war against Chechen separatists. The air raids and artillery bombardments were so devastating that, in one sense, the city of Grozny ceased to exist, leaving behind only rubble, about 100,000

dead, and over half a million displaced persons. A siege of the city in a second war, from late 1999 through February 2000, left Grozny, according to the United Nations, "the most destroyed city on Earth." And yet, when the city of Grozny vanished, it did so, for the most part, without our notice of it.

Aside from the attention Grozny received from a few brave journalists and from certain human rights organizations, the plight of the city and its citizens never really seized the public imagination and it could even be argued to form a kind of blank spot in the late twentieth-century historical memory; this is especially distressing when we understand that the Russian government took advantage of the climate of fear after 9/11 to engage in systematic "sweep" operations and nighttime raids that resulted in the "disappearance" of thousands of Chechens, many of whom turned up later in mass, unmarked graves.[2] At the same time, Russia kept Grozny unreconstructed for almost a decade as a "lesson" to the Chechen rebels. Grozny has since been rebuilt, and at a frenetic, almost manic pace, which only adds to the blankness of our memory of its former (and very recent) destruction.

Consider all of the unmarked graves and potter's fields of history, and also this photograph of a vandalized Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, Poland, taken in 2008. At the same time that some of us might struggle to approach any of these fields—now irrevocably *past*—that should have commanded our concerted attention, human rights discourses within the university have been disturbed and dislodged by the weakening status of terms such as "the human" and "universal." And there has been a significant turn as well *beyond* "the human" (or, the liberal humanist subject) in many of our disciplines—a turn which is often accompanied by a nod to the "end of history." This poses a great challenge to those

[2] See the Briefing Paper, "Worse Than War: 'Disappearances' in Chechnya—A Crime Against Humanity," *Human Rights Watch*, March 2005, http://hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/chechnya0305/index.htm. On the dismal human rights situation in Chechnya in general from about 1999 through 2005, see the series of reports collected in "Chechnya: Renewed Catastrophe," *Human Rights Watch*, 2006, http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/russia/Chechnya; "Memorandum to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights on the Human Rights Situation in Chechnya," *Human Rights Watch*, 18 March 2002, http://www.hrw.org/un/unchr-chechnya.htm; and Anna Politkoskaya, *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya*, trans. Alexander Burry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

of us concerned with the future of humanistic letters and with the human rights discourses founded upon those letters, especially when, as John Caputo has written, "We are in the fix that cannot say 'we'," and yet, "the obligation of me to you and both of us to others . . . is all around us, on every side, tugging at our sleeves."[3] We are situated at a point of crisis with regard to how to formulate and put into effective practice international human rights, or any concept of justice, at a time when the category of "the human" itself is viewed as primarily fictitious and increasingly questionable as a basis for rights and justice. But, the question has to be asked: was the category of "the human" ever stable to begin with? This raises the question of history, and deep history at that.

Part III The Problem of the Post/human

Many of the current discourses on post/humanism focus on the ways in which new findings in fields such as biotechnology and computing have destabilized the category "human," leading to distress over what might be called the loss of human authority and dignity (we might call this the futurist-dystopic view).[4] Other discourses have concentrated on a theoretical reform of a humanistic philosophical tradition (from the Renaissance through modernity) believed to have produced an oppressive "history of possessive subjectivism"[5] (this is the self-critical philosophical view).[6] And in some circles (primarily scientific, but also cultural,

---

[3] John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 6.

[4] For the best example of the "crisis" perspective, see Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farar, Straus and Giroux, 2002). See also Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, Eng.: Blackwell, 2000); Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2000); and Langdon Winner, *The Reactor and the Whale: The Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[5] Iain Chambers, *Culture after Humanism: History, Culture, Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 4.

[6] For an excellent overview of "critical humanisms," see Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley, *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003). See also Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (London: Hutchinson, 1986); Tzvetan Todorv, *The Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of the Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

studies) the same post/human turn has led to some giddy discourses over all of the ways in which we—whatever "we" might be—might finally be able to escape or somehow make less vulnerable (and more pleasurable and multi-extensive) the death-haunted trap of our all-too-human bodies (this is the futurist-utopic, or transhumanist, view).[7]

According to Katherine Hayles, "the humanities have always been concerned with shifting definitions of the human," so "the human has always been a kind of contested term," but "what the idea of the posthuman evokes that is not unique to the 20th century but became much more highly energized in the 20th century, is the idea that technology has progressed to the point where it has the capability of fundamentally transforming the conditions of human life." As Hayles elaborates, even though "one of the deep ideas of the humanities is that the past is an enduring reservoir of value, and that it pays us deep dividends to know the past," there are some things "that have never happened before in human history. . . . we've never had the possibility for manipulating our own genome in a generation as opposed to 150 generations."[8]
It has to be admitted that in most post/humanist discourses, whether in the humanities or the sciences, the scholarship of those who work in premodern periods is not considered relevant to the

[7] On the futurist-utopic (or more affirmative) view, in both scientific and cultural studies, see especially Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schultze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988); Nick Bostrom, "Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up," http://nickbostrom.com; Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press, 2002); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, "Introduction: Posthuman Bodies," in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Halberstam and Livingston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) and *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Eduardo Kac, *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 2007); Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Viking, 1999) and *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking, 2005); Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1988); Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-Technology, and the Mutations of Desire* (London: Continuum, 2004); Lee Silver, *Remaking Eden: Cloning and Beyond in a Brave New World* (New York: Avon, 1997); and Gregory Stock, *Redesigning Humans: Our Inevitable Genetic Future* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).
[8] Quoted in Don Solomon, "Interview with N. Katherine Hayles: Preparing the Humanities for the Post Human," *National Humanities Center*, May 2007, http://asc.nhc.trp.nc.us/news/?page_id=81.

discussion—even though much recent scholarship in medieval studies, for example, is definitively concerned with issues of the human and the animal, self and subjectivity, cognition and theory of mind, singularity and networks, corporality and embodiment, bare life and sociality, flesh versus machine, and so on. So, for example, in his book *Medieval Identity Machines*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that the Middle Ages were already post/human, for it was a period fascinated with composite bodies and with transformations between the human and inhuman, and human identity in this period, "despite the best efforts of those who possess[ed] it to assert otherwise," was "unstable, contingent, hybrid, discontinuous."[9] In all times and places, as Cohen has also argued elsewhere, being human really means "endlessly 'becoming human.' It means holding an uncertain identity, an identity that is always slipping away from us."[10] This resonates with Hayles's idea that human subjectivity emerges from and is integrated "into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it."[11] In other words, we have never been human, or we have always been post/human, and if we are to have any hope of negotiating human rights issues in the twenty-first century, we would do well to consider how heavily the past weighs upon the future—all the ways in which, historically, "the human," however we define that, has emerged into view and contested for something. And this is especially important when, as Cohen writes, the future "is [always] embodied in what seems wholly new," and we have great need now to think the human "in more capacious terms."[12]

We would also do well to keep in mind the philosopher Charles Taylor's assertion that there is never just one modernity, but rather, multiple modernities—multiple modernities, moreover,

---

[9] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Introduction: Possible Bodies," in *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xxiii [xi–xxix].

[10] Jeffrey J. Cohen, "Afterword: An Unfinished Conversation About Glowing Green Bunnies," in *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird (Hampshire, Eng.: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 373–74 [363–75].

[11] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 291.

[12] Cohen, "Afterword: An Unfinished Conversation About Glowing Green Bunnies," p. 372.

that are predicated upon the self-understandings that have been constitutive of a plurality of different social groups that have each "modernized in their own way."[13] There are certain features and institutions of modernity that become inescapable: the bureaucratic state, secularism, the market economy, science, technology, and the like, but each is inflected by certain local particularities, each moving at their own speeds. This calls to mind Fernand Braudel's important insight that, "[w]hether it is a question of the past or of the present, a clear awareness of this plurality of social time is indispensable to the communal methodology of the human sciences."[14]

Part IV The Question of Being-Together

There are many different Nows existing alongside each other and within each of them, multiple pasts, and the figure of the human is inextricably bound up with these multiple pasts—pasts in which the human never was itself. Much current scholarship in medieval studies has been contributing important insights to the ways in which temporality is decidedly *not* wired in the "straight" ways we often imagine it is,[15] and as the medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw

[13] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 1.

[14] Fernand Braudel, "Histoire et sciences sociale: La longue durée," trans. Sarah Matthews, in *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, ed. Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt (New York: The New Press, 1995), p. 117 [115–45].

[15] Regarding a medieval studies that is critical of and subverts traditional historicist and modern academic teleologies, see See Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Kruger and Burger, *Queering the Middle Ages*; Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, "Introduction," in *Queering the Middle Ages*, ed. Burger and Kruger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. xi–xxiii; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Introduction: Midcolonial," in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Cohen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 1–17 and "Time's Machines," in Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 1–34; Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007); Bruce Holsinger and Ethan Knapp, "The Marxist Premodern," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34.3 (Fall 2004): 463–71; Eileen A. Joy and Myra J. Seaman, "Through a Glass, Darkly: Medieval Cultural Studies at the End of History," in *Cultural Studies of the Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 1–20; Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncracies: Female Sexuality Before Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

has written, "chronology, the time line of events, clock time, do not tell us everything—or, in many cases, even very much—about human experience. . . . Not only is time not a smooth stream, but it is also not the same for everyone."[16] We might reflect that those living in Grozny, Chechnya in the 1990s inhabited a very different world than those living in Manhattan at the same time, recalling the words of Ernst Bloch,

> Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, through the fact that they can be seen today. But they are thereby not yet living at the same time with the others.[17]

And yet, for all of our separateness—both in time and space—some insight into what has always been our post/human condition may help us to see, as Judith Butler has written, that

> my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others . . . . [and] I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to the 'you,' by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. . . . This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.[18]

This raises the question of sociality and community and our obligations to others precisely at the moment we have not yet grasped, and are still struggling to grasp, the terms of our human-ness. And this is troubling since, historically, we have depended on the category of the human as a basis for deciding who we can relate to, or not. We do not know, any more, in the words of medievalist Cary Howie, whether or not "it is still possible to

---

2006); Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Frederico, eds., *The Post-Historical Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); D. Vance Smith, "Irregular Histories: Forgetting Ourselves," *New Literary History* 28.2 (1997): 161–84; and Paul Strohm, "Postmodernism and History," in Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 149–62.

[16] Carolyn Dinshaw, "Are We Having Fun Yet? A Response to Prendergast and Trigg," *New Medieval Literatures* 9 (2007): 235 [231–41].

[17] Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 97; cited in Dinshaw, "Are We Having Fun Yet?", p. 235.

[18] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 46, 49.

"speak this fragile pronoun 'we,' across temporal, spatial, and ontological difference."[19] And we approach our dilemma at a time when, as Bill Readings argued in *The University in Ruins*, the University has, for the most part, lost its cultural function and has become a "transnational bureaucratic corporation"—one where "the centrality of the traditional humanistic disciplines to the life of the University is no longer assured."[20] For all of its elegant architecture, the University is "a *ruined* institution, one that lost its historical *raison d'etre*," but "the loss of the University's cultural function [also] opens up a [vital] space in which it is possible to think the notion of community otherwise, without recourse to notions of unity, consensus, and communication."[21] This is a space, moreover, where the University, in Readings's words, "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."[22] In Readings's "ruined" University, thinking would be "a shared process without identity or unity," and instead of a new interdisciplinary space that would "reunify" the increasingly fragmented disciplines, there would be a continually "shifting disciplinary structure that holds open the question of whether and how [our] thoughts fit together."[23]

We have much still to learn about what it means to be, and to have always been, post/human, and I want to make the plea that much work in medieval studies is contributing important historical insights into the ways in which "the human" is and always has been ever-mobile, unbounded, pluralistic, creatively anachronistic, and open-ended, while also being, in the words of medievalist

---

[19] Cary Howie, *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 1.
[20] Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 3.
[21] Readings, *The University in Ruins*, pp. 19, 20.
[22] Readings, *The University in Ruins*, p. 20.
[23] Readings, *The University in Ruins*, p. 192.

David Gary Shaw, a "highly localized site of awareness."[24] There are many texts from the Middle Ages that offer important critical resources to us, not only for formulating what we mean when we invoke or *move toward* the post/human, but also for developing new vocabularies that might help us to grasp the libratory potential (on both personal and more broadly social levels) of more enworlded and inter-subjective senses of being—human and otherwise.

We arrive, always, and belatedly, to the sites of human destruction—whether fictional or real: to the burning timbers of Heorot or the rubble of Grozny—and it may be that the so-called "project" of human and other rights is one that always comes after, that arrives too late, and yet must still make repair, and hopefully, with as much depth of historical consciousness as possible, wherever that might lead us. And I wonder if I might ask, perhaps provocatively, if a sustained, intellectual and even social-scientific consideration of love might have something to do with our way forward?

I am recalled, finally, to Jeanette Winterson's recent novel, *The Stone Gods*, which interweaves several narratives that take place, alternately, between the beginning of the first Ice Age, eighteenth-century Easter Island, a near-future post-apocalytpic London, and the bio-enhanced far future of planet Orbus. Each narrative concerns one primary character, Billie Crusoe, who is in love with a robo-sapiens named Spike whose body consists of only her head. Near the end of the novel, just before Billie is shot to death by android soldiers in an edge-city built in a junkyard, she wonders,

> A quantum universe—neither random nor determined. A universe of potentialities, waiting for an intervention to affect the outcome.
> Love is an intervention.[25]

---

[24] David Gary Shaw, *Necessary Conjunctions: The Social Self in Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 12.
[25] Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods: A Novel* (London: Harcourt, 2007), p. 205.

With the scholar of religious studies Thomas Carlson, we might hope to agree that the task now is

> to see the incomprehensibility of the human as a function of its inextricable ties, both mortal and natal, with the world—and to see that world, itself no more captured or conquered by picture than is the human, as one in which and for which love opens rather than closes possibility and its [multiple] temporali[ties].[26]

---

[26] Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and Creation of the Human* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 215.