

Fragments for a History of Vanishing Humanism, edited by Myra Seaman and Eileen Joy. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2016. Pp. 281. ISBN 9780814213049.

Aimed at critics focused on modernity as well as premodernity, in posthumanism and in medieval studies, the essays in *Fragments for a History of Vanishing Humanism*, edited by Myra Seaman and Eileen Joy, cover an extensive temporal range, from the paleolithic to the contemporary. The collection strives to fill the need for “a theoretically rigorous *longer* historical perspective” in posthumanism (9). In “Introduction: The Work, or the Agency, of the Nonhuman in Premodern Art,” Anna Kłosowska and Eileen Joy emphasize that it is past time for a critical posthumanism that explores concerns including the significance of historical and other forms of human expression embedded in specific ecologies, the importance of art and literature to defining the human, the importance of history in “defining and re-memembering the human,” and “the constructive *and* destructive relations (aesthetic, historical, and philosophical) of the human to the nonhuman” (14-15).

The first half of the volume is organized around “Singularities, Species, Inter/faces,” addressing critical issues of human being, human becoming, and the undoing of the human. These essays also focus on the historical and critical challenges of delineating the human in ways that introduce the conceptual challenges which posthumanism explores.

In “Paleolithic Representations of Human Being at Chauvet and Rouffignac,” Jefferey Skoblow considers cave images in France and notes that most portraits offer “no apparent figuratively human dimension,” while for those that have been identified as offering a human dimension, identification remains uncertain. This indeterminacy raises the question: how do we understand the human? Skoblow notes that the human is “marked by gender and/or sexual identity, and by relations to animal being that are at once a matter of blurred boundaries and sharp distinctions” (37), but, as he also suggests, the key point is that these images raise this question, provoking a “radical conceptual instability [that] remains with us” (50).

Eileen Joy’s “Eros, Event, and Non-Faciality in Malory’s ‘The Tale of Balyn and Balan’” also relies on time to evaluate the human. Joy argues that notions of time and temporality insufficiently allow for grasping time’s “continual and dissonant ‘forking’” (55) and posits literary narratives as ideal sites for the exploration of time. She shows how the overlap of chivalric “adventure” with Claude Romano’s concept of humans as an “advenant” questions expectations

for human identity constituted through interiority. Balyn invites us to think of the human as an advenant who desires not domination nor projection, but rather “seeks opportunities to well up” in events, an engagement with the world in process. This, Joy suggests, invites us to think about living within both romance and history (64).

In chapter 3, “The Book of Hours and iPods, Passionate Lyrics, and Prayers: Technologies of the Devotional Self,” Tim Spence juxtaposes books of hours and iPods to examine how both function as technologies enabling users to access their passions. Spence adduces other parallels to conclude that these devices “habituate an individual into a mode of being that links human emotions to a corporate identity that is both omnipresent and invisible, and not at all human” (94). Spence’s essay vividly illustrates what emerges when using medieval to “think with” the modern posthuman.

Chapter 4, “What *Does* Language Speak? Feeling the Human with Samuel Beckett and Chrétien de Troyes” by Daniel C. Remein and Anna Kłosowska presents a “diachronic comparative mode” of analysis that considers two temporally disparate texts through approaches involving new materialism, post-humanism, queerness, feminism, phenomenology, and metaphysics to think through how language speaks (97). Deftly moving from approach to approach, the path Remein and Kłosowska trace engages repeatedly with Heidegger’s assertion that “Language speaks us” to refract that claim through the human and humanism revealed in moments of proximity between Beckett’s *Molloy* and Chrétien’s *Perceval*. They conclude that Language works through fragments of language, not its totality, and these fragments “fleetingly operate in erotic complicity with the allure of accidents” (124).

The second half of *Fragments* concentrates on issues related to “Human, Inhuman, Spectacle” that center around human/inhuman relations and the oft-indistinguishability of the dividing line between the two. In addressing both the separation and merging of human and inhuman, these essays raise ethical and cultural dilemmas for readers’ consideration.

“Aninormality,” contributed by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, centers around several questions about aesthetics and art, including: “Can art be something more than a human perception?” (133). Cohen draws on Roger Caillois’s proposal of *aninormality* as an aesthetic trigger “that propels us into a lively realm where human and nonhuman counterinfect” (140) to explore medieval aninormality in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* and Marie de France’s *Yonec*. For Cohen, these works include representations of nonhuman art, Stonehenge, and an underground chamber, which provoke disorientation via displacement of the human.

In chapter 6, “Humanist Waste,” Michael A. Johnson addresses the “conception of the medieval as a persistent ‘material trace’” to introduce the metaphor of the trace as excrement. Johnson moves from the history of waste disposal, to troubadour lyrics’ treatment of waste, then to avant-garde engagements with waste. These approaches craft an invitation “to see all things, and especially art, as shit,” thus introducing the questions: “how is this shit contextualized, [and] what ideologies determine the way I experience this shit?” (174). Johnson posits that the ambivalence of waste offers a way to “thinking our way out of the crisis in sublimation” (174).

Chapter 7, “How Delicious We Must Be / Folcuin’s Horse and the Dog’s Gowther, Beyond Care,” begins with Karl Steel’s evaluation of medieval descriptions of the superior taste of human flesh to highlight how “the human subject comports itself as if it were desirable, as if it especially mattered” (184). For Steel, this opens a moment to consider, instead, what happens when humans take instruction from animals. Drawing on Donna Haraway, among others, Steel argues that, “We must suspend ourselves between two impossibilities: the unjustifiable need to defend ourselves from the appetite of others” and taking care of others “even if what we protect takes no notice of us at all” (192).

In chapter 8, “Excusing Laius: Freud’s Oedipus, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, and Lydgate’s Edippus,” Daniel T. Kline reorients our understanding of the Oedipus narrative by rereading the contrasting depictions by Freud and Lydgate, the latter as framed through Levinas. Attending to the different influences that shape Oedipus, Kline argues that Lydgate counters Freud’s Oedipus-as-Everyman with a representation of Oedipus that is not universal, but singular, exceptional, adaptive, culturally embedded, and “firmly wedded to the warp and woof of history” (222). Lydgate’s Edippus offers the possibility of freedom and a nonteleological future.

The volume concludes with a coda by Craig Dionne, “The Trick of Singularity: *Twelfth Night*, Stewards of the Posthuman, and the Problem of Aesthetics.” Dionne traces instances of misreading the Other illustrated by Feste and Orsino to warn readers that “we can potentially shut our ear to alterity in our very efforts to hear it” (243). Dionne cautions that efforts to rethink otherness may nevertheless fail to rethink the anthropocene.

Fragments offers a multifaceted, engaging approach to posthumanism and its invitations to critical inquiry. It resists closing the conversation by developing as many questions as its provocative essays answer.

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