

Midhumanism

What if the Middle Ages were middle to nothing?

What if we unhooked this ungainly millennium from the easy progress narrative through which it earned its disparaging name, as an in-between time during which the slow progress of humanism and the human were arrested for a while? Allan Mitchell writes of giving up on the “Burkhardtian mythology about how the brambles of faith had to be cleared for reason to flourish in the modern period” (*Becoming Human* xxiii), where medieval piety impedes realization of what it means to be a reason-filled human. Mitchell’s focus is upon an emergent creatureliness (xxvii) most evident at imagined beginnings, from embryos to the cosmic egg. Yet his dynamic ontogenies ceaselessly open middle spaces that do not easily close again – so that (he writes) “we can begin to see that anthropocentrism has not always been an inevitable mode of self-understanding” (xviii). What if we gave up on human-centric narratives of history all together, narratives that assume every idea has – just like us! -- an infancy, maturation and perhaps eventual death, as if concepts must inhabit the all too human frames of those who dream them? What if some ideas are never born, never exactly perish? Spontaneous generation anyone? Nonpaternal origins? Parthenogenesis? Queer ideation? Generative cross-species or cross-ontological hybridities? What if, as Mitchell argues, humanization itself is an unfinishable process, so that even adults are forever neotenic, forever developing? We need better metaphors, better ways to convey that the life of the human is always lived and thought and written from the thick of things, not from a story of heroic beginnings and self-satisfied, culminative ends. So let’s abandon the narrative of prehumanism to humanism to interruptive middle ages

to humanism again to posthumanism, where becoming human is something we learned and then forgot and then learned again so that we can forget it again. What about a midhuman where all kinds of becomings are possible, and are not harnessed to Bildungsroman-like trajectories of commencement and termination?

Let's begin then with the poet of the unstable "middel weie" (Prol.17), John Gower. In the preface to his edition of the *Confessio Amantis* Russell A. Peck writes aptly that "one might make much of the 'in-betweenness' of Gower's poem" – and not just because the work offers "a pathway *between* rigorous instruction and entertainment." More than a map of some middle spaces, I think, the poem actively proliferates middleness. In his explication of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar in his prologue, Gower stresses the continuity between humans and their world, with humanity functioning as a kind of ecological interface. Environmental turbulence is the result of human actions -- so that his word "climat" means earthly zone of habitation but is becoming *climate* in the sense we now know it, as barometer of anthropogenic industry as well as register of affect. For Gower, human bodies are dynamic middle spaces: enmeshed with a cosmos that reaches all the way to weather in the "welkin" and the distant stars, offering a miniature version of that inhuman universe. Gower cites no less an authority than Pope Gregory's *Moralia in Job* for describing the body as a microcosm (and conversely, positing the macrocosm as utterly continuous with the human):

Forthi Gregoire in his *Moral*
Seith that a man in special
The lasse world is properly,
And that he proeveth redely.

Man is microcosm (or “lasse world”) because he is midway on the ladder of Nature. Above him are the angels, whom he resembles with his “soule resonable.” Just below him are the beasts, which likewise have the ability to feel. On the next rung down are plants, which grow. Finally the ladder’s base is stone, which (like everything that arrives higher on its scale) can at least be said to exist (“The stones ben and so is he”). This *scala naturae* is not built upon transcendence but continuity: humans are made of stone, plant, animal, angel – offering a version of what Mitchell calls the “medieval environmental imaginary” composed of cross-ontological entanglements, revealing that “complicated ecologies underpin even the tidiest of cosmologies.”² The ladder has a tendency to intermix what it should compartmentalize. The human at the its middle is much to blame. “The man” writes Gower, is “as a world” – but not a self-enclosed one:

And whan this litel world mistorneth,
The grete world al overtorneth.
The lond, the see, the firmament,
Thei axen alle jugement
Agein the man and make him werre.

When human society is divided against itself, turbulent and divisive, the world likewise becomes unstable, stormy. Man is responsible for ecological upheaval: “The man is cause of alle wo, / Why this world is divided so” (Prologue 945-66). Take that, global warming deniers. John Gower proved anthropogenic climate change centuries ago: “The purest eir for senne alofte / Hath ben and is corrupt ful ofte” (921-22).

Well, not really. As Gower makes clear, even though he is using this figuration politically, it’s a story “as telleth the clergie,” a tale of divine rebuke

for humanity's earthly sins. Then again, it's not as if we have separated our politics from our theology at this moment, when we pretty much do expect the Earth to act against us as a punishing deity for having thrown the environment out of balance. Our world is an intensified version of the ecology of disarray Gower describes as prelude to his explication of Gregory and man as a "littel world." Gower describes our earthly habitation as full of "hyhe wyndes," overflowing seas, flood and drought, land that erodes away, vanishing plants, storms, and at the center of "al the worldes werk" is "man and his condicioun" (923-44). As Mitchell puts it so well in his own reading of Gower's "ecocentric and epigenetic" cosmology:

There is no neutral background or foreground for individuals in this universe – all the elements are equally 'there' – key to what Timothy Morton calls ecological thought Anthropogenic change affords a much-needed view of the total catastrophe. And it is a medieval view. (*Becoming Human* 42-43)³

Midhuman, where human is difficult to tell from world, macrocosm and microcosm entangled rather than parallel.

How to escape this endemic terrestrial turbulence, a "dedly werre" (904) of all mundane things centered on humans, so profound that it catches up the very elements? Well, we could just leave. Good-bye, Blue Marble that we see in the rear view mirror as we depart the only home we've known. In retrospect and from space you are a beautiful globe, land enclosed by shimmering sea. You're small, we see that now as we wave good-bye, thanks for the perspective because it was so easy to get caught up in everyday catastrophes when we were Earthbound. Onward to a new place, a paradise where we can be visitors rather

than culpable agents of environmental dysfunction. Escape the Earth and escape our midhumanism, become something more refined. Maybe we will be what Gregory called angels.

You might think that I am describing any number of science fiction movies (and of course I am), but the impulse to imagine oneself above the Earth in order to escape the tumultuous vicissitudes of being human is an ancient one. Medieval authors knew that vision as the *Dream of Scipio*, narrated by Cicero in the sixth book of his *De re publica* and available through a detailed commentary composed by Macrobius, who used the dream to detail the contours of the cosmos. The Roman general Scipio is visited in his slumber by his famous adoptive grandfather, who gives the young man a view of the Earth from the heavens. To the melodious soundtrack of the planetary spheres, Scipio the Younger peers down from the high ether at the Earth become a small spot, Rome almost nothing on its surface. The various climates of the globe resolve into five bands: two polar ice fields, two temperate and habitable zones on either side of the equator, and a torrid desert dividing them from each other. In manuscript illustrations this Earth resembles a small version of Jupiter with its vivid stripes. When Scipio returns from this dream-enabled vantage point, where he had been surrounded by shimmering stars, the Milky Way, and the souls of the great among the departed, he is fortified with a Stoic contempt for all things terrestrial. He has his perspective: this world is beautiful from space, perhaps, but its human and climatic dynamism is just bustle. More lasting worlds are at its exterior. Scipio rises above it all to gain some perspective. He beholds a Striped Marble rather than what the Apollo astronauts called a Blue Marble but there is a

continuity here: technology only realizes a dream humans have long had, imagination as propulsion out of our human boundedness.

Where Scipio goes, Chaucer follows. His narration of the backwards glance of Troilus upon a globe become “this litel spot of erthe, that with the see / Embraced is” (*Troilus and Criseyde* V.1814-17) derives ultimately from Macrobius – though the desire to view the Earth from above is ancient and recurring. For as long as humans have imagined their world as round (which is to say, pretty much throughout Western recorded history) we have also imagined a point of view that can apprehend the Earth from above its surface. Our desire to be less Earthbound, at least during the space of a dream or a science fiction film or a narrative poem about the last days of Troy is a desire to escape our midhumanism, our entanglement in a world that exceeds us and yet is intimate to our thoughts and deeds. We can’t quite manage that escape.

But we are also unlikely to stop trying. What we can choose, though, is to refuse the example of Scipio and Troilus, who look back upon the Earth and convince themselves that most lives do not matter, that a proper response to rising above the tempest is to laugh. Gower got it right, I think: embrace the *problem* of human middleness, explore its implications, stay with it, stay with the world, think rigorously about the unexpected environmental consequences of human actions even if that requires an eight book poem. The *Confessio Amantis* ends in eternal heaven, “thilke place / Wher resteth love and alle pes, / Oure joie mai ben endeles” (8.3170-72). But it takes a very long time to arrive there, so enamored is Gower of middle ways and middle-making as a perpetual becoming of the human.

¹ Thinking here of the work of Karl Steel: crawling things essay in *Elemental Ecocriticism*, oysters work in Oceanic New York.

² See *Becoming Human* p. xii and 175 as well as Kellie Robertson in AVMEO.

³ Mitchell continues: "Gower's thought is consequently ecological, not despite the hierarchical and holistic cosmos, but owing to the strength of the contingent bonds between upper and lower elements. Gower highlights the ligatures, joints, and connective tissues of the organizes whole, as does Macrobius when he says that people and planetary bodies share in animus. No micro or macro view has a monopoly over the whole complex system of interrelations, then" (43).