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# Critical II/literacy: Humanism, Heidegger, Anti-Humanism

Renate Holub

## 1. *AGAINST HUMANISM*

Rumor has it that humanism is out and anti-humanism is in.<sup>1</sup> This, at least, is the feeling one gets while watching the late-twentieth-century contest-of-the-faculties show in the academy. Those intellectuals in the humanities who think of themselves as avant-garding something of a political consciousness neatly register the world of texts under two distinct headings: that which one fancies apposite to humanism (traditional humanism, marxist humanism, etc.), and that which one fancies affixed, suffixed, or prefixed to humanism (pre-humanism, post-humanism, etc.). The complexity of difference in discursive formations is conveniently reduced to a simple equation: humanism to any power equals conservatism squared, whereas the square-root of anti-humanism squarely roots infinitesimal liberational power.

Let me refer you, to get to the point, to a critical discourse from the eighties on cultural literacy as it appeared in the 1984/85 issue of *Boundary 2* entitled "Humanism and the University."<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the topic announced in its title, the issue deals with neither humanism nor the university. And it does not deal with the relation of the university to humanism either. Though the two volumes, subdivided into "The Discourse of Humanism"

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and "The Institutions of Humanism," comprise something of a thousand pages and almost fifty contributors, humanism is not even in one of these contributions cross-culturally or genealogically considered. Nor is the university considered in terms of its complex field of operations in a society dynamically moving towards informatization. The complexity of the "university," with its relation of knowledge-production processes to interested stratas within the industrial-military-administrative complex, becomes reduced in *Boundary 2* to the "English Department," and "humanism" is ritually reduced to an empty noun which those initiated to anti-humanism will fill with a sufficiently amorphous conservative content.<sup>3</sup> The noun "humanism" is put from the start under such an inexorable anti-humanist siege that its final terminal bombing perforates nothing but a wasteland. Resistance to such systematic destruction, in the form of counter-argument or counter-memory to anti-humanism, is, with the exception of Gerald Graff, thoroughly rooted out from the beginning in a peculiar spirit of orthodoxy. A sad ending, if one considers that the editor had his heart in the right place when he reacted to the report on the humanities by William J. Bennett, who had called upon educators to restore to the core curriculum the great canons of Western civilization, thereby ignoring the cultural needs of a multi-ethnic and multi-class society. That *Boundary 2* intervened in that unsettling issue of cultural literacy and illiteracy needs to go on record. Yet what also needs to go on record are the rhetorics of that discourse as presented in *Boundary 2*. What I would like to say is this: the metaphors emanating from these texts are grounded in a formidable workout in phenomenological reductionism without sufficient reflection on its own life-enhancing principle of the negative, and without sufficient reflection on its own possible systemic institutional complicity in the preservation of a conservative and dangerous status quo. Following relentless logics of reductionism, many of the contributors to that issue on the discourse on humanism and the university intransigently close the door on cross-cultural and political issues before the issue of humanism and the university has been examined.

I will in the following 1) briefly comment on some of the reductionist principles that dominate the rhetoric of anti-humanism, 2) evoke the imagery of desires operating in the subtextuality of that gesture (geometry over history), and 3) propose the minimal contours of a possible alternative to reductionism, the contours of a literacy of differentiation, which those in the business of critical literacy might want to take into consideration.

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## 2. LOGICS OF ANTI-HUMANISM

Many of the stories in this anthology on humanism are told by members of the "English Institute." A stray philosopher, a political scientist, a sociologist, or a theologian was allowed to join the ranks here and there, yet only if that voice melodiously carried the anti-humanism tune. Transmitters of knowledge from other fields—from physics or biology, or perhaps from economy or ecology—were denied, so it appears, any possibility of transgression. At first sight, when comparing the historical trajectories of educational policy structures of a variety of nations, this bias makes sense. Problems of cultural literacy naturally tend to receive more attention from that intellectual community which works in the context of the national language and literature in question. So that the "English Institute" should enlist itself in that march against Bennett is not without precedent. Indeed, it keeps with a tradition. After all, supporters of Bennett originate in that community as well—Allan Bloom with his *The Closing of the American Mind*, for instance. But who or what compels the "English Institute" to fetishize that tradition, to exclude members from "foreign" fields of knowledge in an era (let us call it postmodern for lack of a more convenient term) in which the formation and control of cultural literacy, as well as illiteracy, is related to interstructural decentralizations that lie far beyond the domain and reach of the "English Institute," while simultaneously exerting systemic pressures (significant curtailment of funding, etc.) on the formation of that institute? So why does the "English Institute" cultivate—without much self-reflection on the marginal space it inhabits next to the social sciences and the hard sciences in the context of the university—the image of self-appointed leadership on issues which concern the intellectual and social community at large? Why does it display recurrent bouts of xenophobia when it comes to hard scientists, to economists, to computer scientists, to ecologists, or to information technologists? And yet, these rather alarming symptoms of xenophobia mysteriously disappear when intransigent opponents to "humanism" are concerned, such as Heidegger.

The "anti-humanist" discourse on humanism and the university, as response to Bennett's response to the literacy crisis, takes place in the "English Institute" and Heidegger's letter "Brief über den Humanismus," written in 1947 to his French friend Jean Beaufrais who would, a few decades later, cause headlines with his declaration that "there was no holocaust." So this letter on

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humanism becomes the authoritative reference, both in terms of its reductionist methodology and its logic of desire, of this rhetoric against humanism.<sup>4</sup> A discourse which desires to be a political discourse against authority, control, and power, against ethnic and cultural underrepresentation in curricula development, that discourse chooses the authority of Heidegger's text. This is one of the foremost principles of the anti-humanists. I am not interested here in a lengthy rehashing of Heidegger's past, nor in the relationship between his past and his philosophy, nor in the question of whether his can be a great philosophy when his ethics were so despicable.<sup>5</sup> These are questions one has to answer to and for oneself. It is in any event easy to find out that Heidegger became a Nazi when the power of Nazism enhanced his power structure as a university administrator and philosopher (as many petit bourgeois tend[ed] to opportunistically adjust to and accommodate the wind that blows) and that, when morally and financially implicated after the war, he skillfully tried to cover up the sacrifices he had offered to that regime, mostly in the currency of terminating careers of the less fit—in Nazi terms. It is also easy to find out that he is a perhaps unsurpassed master in handling the German language, and that he has fascinated many a mind with his teachings on the possibilities and powers, the impossibilities and powerlessness, residing in language. What seems somewhat more problematic is whether Heidegger's metaphysical and theological program is by necessity the theoretical authority on the basis of which to interrogate the American university and its vast and complex operative itinerary at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century. Simply because Allan Bloom spouts his conservative jeremiads against "the German connection"<sup>6</sup>—against Nietzsche and Heidegger as dangerous extremists who relativize the realm of ethical values, who preach elitism and inequality over democracy and equality, who embrace creativity over rationality, rootedness and provinciality over cosmopolitanism—simply because Bloom polemicizes against Heidegger is very little reason indeed to polemicize with Heidegger against Bloom. Why wage the struggle on oedipal grounds?

Heidegger's metaphysical authority, when it comes to the question of humanism and the university, is a theoretical choice that apparently has its advantages. It legitimizes a quite restrictive view as to what humanism and anti-humanism are. This helps to eliminate the experiences of different forms of humanism from the pages of history, such as the complex period of Italian humanism, for instance. So in the very act of arguing for a more

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democratic, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic representation of voices which have hitherto been silenced within the discourse on humanism and the university, one of the disciplines which has traditionally played a rather marginal role in the academy, Italian studies, is again, this time thanks to Heidegger's thanking thinking, without a voice.<sup>7</sup> In the above mentioned letter, "Brief über den Humanismus," Heidegger distinguishes, among other things, between three terms: homo humanus, humanitas, and humanism.<sup>8</sup> The positive terms are the first two, whereas the latter, whether in a singular or plural constellation, is a negative term. "Gegen den Humanismus wird gedacht, weil er die Humanitas des Menschen nicht hoch genug ansetzt" (321). So in a typical Heideggerian rhetorical move, a double operation takes place in such a statement. By using the passive voice of the German language, "wird gedacht," which grammatologically does not require the agent who or by whom "gedacht wird," which does not require, that is, by whom something is being thought or reflected upon, agency or a subject or responsibility is being ousted from the statement which takes place in history. Simultaneously, in the second part of the sentence, which is connected to the first part by a good old traditional household principle of causality, agency or a subject of responsibility is re-established: "weil er die Humanitas des Menschen nicht hoch genug ansetzt," because humanism, now an anthropomorphized entity consisting of a will and a mind, did not validate highly enough the humanity or the "humanitas" of the human being, the "homo humanus." Yet simply by using the passive voice I am not convinced that it is not Heidegger, after all, who thinks against the "Humanismus," rather than an unknowable and mysterious force. And what Heidegger proposes is that "humanitas" and the "homo humanus" are actually constitutive or take part of the same entity, of the truth of Being (*Wahrheit des Seins*). Heidegger believes that pre-socratic thinking, an originary form of thinking as he sees it in Parmenides and Heraklitus, where "thinking is in its element," as he phrases it, is superior to post-socratic forms of thinking, Greek classical philosophy that is, particularly as that form of thinking entered the Latin language and world, which Heidegger then equates with *technè* or the instrument in education and culture. Because Italian humanism or the humanism of the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries is merely an "ism" that reiterates the power of that *technè*, a "renascentia romanitatis" and not a "renascentia presocratica," it too belongs to the category that opposes the search for the true Being. As such, it is no good in Heidegger's ethics.

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For in order to "den Menschen wieder in sein Wesen zuruck-zubringen," in order to return the "homo humanus" to the true Being, in order to determine the "Menschlichkeit des Menschen," the "humanitas" of the "homo humanus," one has to speak highly of the Being (*Sein*) and lowly of the beings (*Seiende*), and interrogate the structure which imposes the sphere of beings on the Being: language.

So in Heidegger's rhetoric, humanism, in its being in time, in its historicity, is reduced to a philosophical and ontological category. That is to say, that historicity of humanism, which for Heidegger consists in the "renascentia romanitatis," that historicity is reduced to a philosophical and ontological category. Humanism becomes introduced to Heidegger's concept of time while simultaneously being excluded from non-Heideggerian concepts of time. What is eclipsed in this doubly reductionist process are the differences in the histories of humanisms, the specificity of different cultures and histories such as Italian humanism, for instance, and the trajectory of the various reception histories of the various humanisms, which include the discourses on humanism during the fascist period in Italy and Germany as well. The cultural, political, social, and economic world of Italian humanism, with its many levels of differentiable practices, with its contradictory tendencies towards cultural and political centralization and fragmentation, with its grounding role, as illustrated in many of the pages of Gramsci's *Quaderni*, in the aborted efforts in the formation of the modern Italian state, that historical and social complexity in time is reduced, in the name of "being" and "time," to a philosophical category.<sup>8</sup> Italian humanism can only exist, in Heidegger's pages, qua "renascentia romanitatis," or it has no right to existence at all.

It should be expected that Heidegger's authoritarian removal of Italian humanism from the historical map would cause some anxiety among supporters with ineluctable ties to Italy. So it comes as no surprise that Ernesto Grassi, both an ardent epigone and distributor of Heideggerian philosophy, as well as an insider to Italian humanism, would rather ambiguously watch the annihilation of an entire Italian tradition. His solution to the problem is ingenious. In his *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism* (1983), he argues that a correct understanding of Italian humanism would have to recognize the philosophical connection between Italian humanism and Heidegger.<sup>10</sup> The philosophical project of Italian humanism was not, he contends, the neo-platonism of the Florence Academy, or Ficino and his acolytes, nor was it

Renaissance Aristoteleanism, since both adhere to a naive anthropomorphism, immanent values, and the rediscovery of the potentialities of the human being. Rather, the authentic philosophical project of Italian humanism focuses on the limited possibilities of existence. That project, which originated in the non-ficinian humanism of a Dante, a Boccaccio, and a Salutati, was then continued in the rhetorical treatises of a Tesauro and a Pellegrini. It culminates in Vico. "One of the central problems of Humanism," Grassi writes in a Heideggerian pose, "is not man, but the question of the original context, the horizon or 'openness' in which man and his world appear" (17). And he claims further:

The amazing thing, usually overlooked, is that these problems are not dealt with in Humanism by means of logical speculative confrontation with traditional metaphysics, but rather in terms of the analysis and interpretation of language, especially poetic language. (17).

In order to maintain his position on the selective affinities between Heidegger and Italian humanism, and above all on the pre-Heideggerian originality of Italian humanism, Grassi is obliged to make three moves: first, by placing the discourses of Italian humanism in the order of a negative theology in the tradition of Dionysius the Aeropagite and John of the Cross—that order which played an eminent role, next to German mysticism, in the formation of Heidegger's conceptuality—he silently eliminates from the Italian philosophical map many other theoretical confrontations, such as the extensive confrontation between the materialist epigones of the Arab traditions (Averroes) and the idealist humanists who were foundational in the philosophical formation of Bruno and Galileo, as well as Vico.<sup>11</sup> Second, by emphasizing a preoccupation with the relation between language and the thing rather than thought and the thing—by understanding, that is, the relation between *res* and *verba* primarily as an ontological problem and not as a historical or political problem as to how language functions in a political and historical context—Grassi needs to ascribe to Italian humanism a concern with ontological difference, a concern with the difference between "Sein" and the "Seiende," while eliminating from Italian humanism its express discourses on the relation of thought to action. And third, by ascribing to Italian humanism a Heideggerian understanding of the primacy of poetic language in the intimate experiences with original Being, Grassi is required to reduce diverse intellectual and political activities as expressed in language to poetic activities



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concerned with the original realm of the non-logical. In short, he gets, perhaps understandably, carried away. While I see that the question of the limitations of knowledge has been a by-product of much of philosophy and theology in the Western tradition, and while I see that this question has found an expression in the discourses on the possibilities and limitations of language during Italian humanism, particularly in poetic and aesthetic theories, I also see that the adherence to a philosophical notion of limited or limitable knowledge to which only a few select poets/priests have access is by far a safer device than a democratic notion of knowledge and action in societies where the mass of the people are dominated, controlled, and manipulated by aristocratic hierarchies. Power has, historically, usually needed legitimations, and Christian dogma, with its emphasis on the limited possibilities of existence, has played a formidable role in delimiting the realm of possibility for the many while exponentially expanding that realm of possibility for a privileged few. I am afraid that Grassi's Heideggerianized reductive tours de force, as understandable as they are in his permanent crusade against the non-metaphorical, non-poetical, and non-rhetorical, would have to be considerably emended: by Blumenberg's work on myth for one, and by Garin's and Gramsci's respective work on intellectual history and the history of intellectuals for another.<sup>12</sup> It would reveal a quite differently concealed story.

If Heidegger's "Brief über den Humanismus" was not particularly convenient for Grassi's sense of history, its absolutist rules of time and causation were especially convenient for the reductionist practices of the discourse on humanism as it unfolds in *Boundary 2*. That discourse is not particularly interested in historical or cultural or conceptual or discursive reconstructions of different forms of humanisms, judging from the absence of even a minimal narrative on Italian humanism. Though the editor becomes indignant when an inquiry by detractors from anti-humanism—to whom he counts the journals *Critical Inquiry* and *New Literary History*—is "virtually devoid of reference to the historical context out of which the ( . . . ) project" emerges, it is very strange indeed that there is no reference to his own historical contextuality.<sup>13</sup> So a further guiding principle of the rhetoric of anti-humanism is its obsession with anti-history. The issue on "Humanism and the University" includes, as already mentioned, the subcategories "The Discourse of Humanism" and "The Institutions of Humanism." If a reader had hoped to find a Foucauldian-type analysis of the institutional or discursive formation of

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humanism, that reader is in for some disappointment. Yet a critical study of the complex formation of the many institutions and discourses on humanism, particularly as these formations relate to the institutional formations in the sciences and of political mythologies, would have been more than welcome. Indeed, Heidegger's interpretation of Italian humanism, for instance, as a historical epoch, and his concomitant philosophical rejection of that period, would be seen as a construction based in good part on both an acceptance of a definition of humanism as developed by Burckhardt and a rejection of the validation of that definition. In other words, Heidegger rejects philosophically something that "is" on the basis of accepting that same "is" in its cultural and historical dimensions as established by Burckhardt. So an inquiry into the institutional formation of humanism would have come across Burckhardt's eminently influential role in the narrative design of humanism and the Renaissance, and much would have been unearthed in such an archaeology: how his notion of humanism, a cultural entity with an emphasis on pagan values, individualism, affirmation of earthly values and opposition to the hegemonic church, how that notion posited humanism as the beginnings of modernity. And how, from a philosophical, universal, and hegemonic perspective, Burckhardt's understanding of humanism and the Renaissance has its legitimacy. It is the instrumentalist point of view of a cosmopolitan intellectual who emarginates and delegitimizes the specificity of a different history, and who reduces the long march towards independence, autonomy, and self-determination of the Italian nation to a philosophical category. Difference must yield to the orthodox party line of universal philosophy. Yet Italian intellectuals, De Sanctis, for instance, and many others before and after him, such as Gramsci, were unable to disregard the underside of humanism, the fact that the nascent bourgeoisie in Italy, in spite of its production of forms of knowledge that should provide a basis for philosophical and scientific modernity, was unable to enter, as did Spain, England, and France, a political modernity in the form of an absolute monarchy.<sup>14</sup> Italy should become a pawn in the hands of the superpowers of modernity, and Burckhardt's limited judgment of what humanism was reflects the partiality and interestedness of those intellectuals who speak in the name of interested power.

It is perhaps not all that surprising that it should be during the fascist period, both in Italy and Germany, that humanism resurfaced next to Burckhardt as a problematical issue. A study

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of the institutional formations of humanism, if *Boundary 2* would have consented to such an inquiry, could hardly have avoided that episode as well. The German Nazi ideologies, attentive towards constructing a mythology which would establish Germany as the heir to technological modernity while simultaneously distancing itself from the Latinity of the Romance cultural traditions, found humanism to be something of a nuisance. Against humanism (as an epoch) and for the Middle Ages, against classical humanism with its mythologies and for Germanic traditions with its thundering gods, against Latinity and for Germanity, and if for some reason one is indeed unable to resist the attractions of classical philosophy, then for Nazi's sake the Greeks, pre-socratic preferably, and not the Latins. The Third Reich traced its political and cultural roots to the Middle Ages and its spiritual roots beyond to the deep black forests on German terrain. Humanism was out of place in that pure Germanic lineage, and against humanism was therefore the preferred pose. Italian fascists were somewhat more in a bind, and the debates surrounding humanism in the early thirties reflect the ambiguities of that binding situation. After all, if, as Burckhardt had authoritatively proposed it, Italian humanism is the cradle of modern European civilization, then the inventors of that humanism, who were Italian, should proudly be legitimated by modern Italians. Yet concurrently, that historical epoch, with its economic rootedness in the pragmatic practices of merchants and bankers of the nascent bourgeoisie, and with its aspirations for a sovereign nation not above but next and comparable to France, Spain, and England, that cultural reconstruction produced a vision too small for the grand imperial designs of Italian fascists. So more and more effective legitimization was sought in the link with the medieval unity and cosmopolitanism of the feudal aristocracy of the Holy Roman Empire and, better still, with the glory that was Rome. Humanism caused some problems in the various attempts to establish continuities beyond periodizations, since it deviated from an authentic genealogy that began with the Roman Empire, prospered in the unity of the Holy Roman Empire, and culminated in Mussolini. Yet humanism had an eminently complex arsenal of symbolics to feed into the imaginary of subsequent times. There are images of independent and powerful city-states, of civil rights, of struggles against the feudal regime in the interest of the political power of the communal bourgeoisie; of permanent quests for a national language and an independent culture, for an autonomous Italianity, all of which propitiously haunted the fascist imagination as well. It was in the

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multiplicity of the figure of Machiavelli that the Italian discourses, during the fascist period, on humanism and anti-humanism, with their antinomies and contradictions, were neutralized and preliminarily laid to rest. For Machiavelli could both afford to stand as the nietzscheanized strongman of Italy's inevitably destined will towards a reality beyond the ethical constraints of democratic norms, beyond good and evil, as well as the balanced and rational representation of a mind whose diagnosis of the specificity of the Italian situation, the imbalance and discrepancy between collective political needs and elitist cultural production, had indeed signified the burial of the Italian national dream. The fascist ideologues, required by trade, as any ideologue, to ideologically neutralize, appease, and control the diversity of its constituency, had proven their talents indeed. Machiavelli was a splendid symbolic choice, controlling the diversity of the cultural unconscious of fascism's economic power, unifying the imaginary of the petit-bourgeois shopowner, of the bourgeois landowners, and of the grand-bourgeois capitalowner alike. In Machiavelli, humanism and anti-humanism opportunity metaphorized into one.<sup>15</sup>

That, of course, was the mythological world of the Nazi and fascist ideologues, and perhaps one should not take the actors of *Boundary 2* to task for not wanting to subject themselves to the fallout of that unsettling historical catastrophe. Yet their resistance to history, their unwillingness to place phenomena in a historical, in a social, in a cultural context, their propensity towards excessive reductionism is unsettling as well. There is much talk, on these pages, for instance, of "the dominant discourse" or of the "dominant political structure of power," yet no attempt is made to analyze or provide a narrative that would explain what this "dominant discourse" might be. There is much talk of reproduction and legitimation of texts, critics, teachers, and culture, as well as of socio-political structures which serve the hegemonic process of the dominant culture, yet no narrative explains how and where a hegemonic process might operate. This obsession with excessive reductionism, this categorical refusal to differentiate and place events in historical contextualities, signals a psychogram that represses the instabilities, fluctuations, and contingencies that is history. The anti-humanist struggle against humanism which tirelessly evokes its conscious motivations for its critical *raison d'être*, its intransigent struggle against the powerful status quo, simultaneously messages an unconscious desire rhetorically arising from the deep structures of the anti-humanist texts. These metaphors are marked by the clarity, simplicity, and staticity of

spatial geometry over and above the contingent temporalities of history.

### 3. GEOMETRY OVER HISTORY

So it is interesting in this anti-humanist reductionist workout to purview the predominant metaphors travailing the texts. The master architects of this discourse, in spite of their diversity in interests and topical and thematic choices, reveal a grammatological space which reduces history, the past, the present, and the future into two registers, what we might call the two registers of adjectives and prepositions. What we see is a whole series of adjectives before a noun "humanism," and a few prepositions, linked by hyphen to the same noun "humanism." A register then of qualifying, value-laden adjectives, of a world of contingencies, judgments, presuppositions, dogmas, normatives, and causation before the noun humanism on one side, and a register of positions, of place, apparently intrinsically impervious to the murky world of hierarchies, values, legitimation, on the other side. It looks something like this:

<i>Adjective-Noun</i>	<i>Preposition-Noun</i>
Western humanism	Pre-humanism
traditional humanism	Anti-humanism
modern humanism	Post-humanism
marxist humanism	
liberal humanism	
bourgeois humanism	
Arnoldian humanism	
Jamesonian humanism	
literary humanism	

The occasional "neo" before humanism, having the disadvantage of being etymologically endowed with the potentiality of escaping the hell of values for the pure eden of time and place, that "neo" suffers the worst fate of all parts of speech in this grammatical war of prepositions against adjectives. Caught in the middle ground between the two camps, it is promptly handcuffed to selective affinities with global "neo" activities: neo-humanists ipso facto neo-fascists. So whatever (or should I say, whoever) is wise enough to align itself with the "pre" or "post" or "anti" before humanism is thought to advance progressively in time, and whoever misses that late-twentieth-century speedy train is condemned to terminal regression on an interminably boring ad-

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jectival recess. Subliminal metaphors arise from the texts: inertia over motion, present over the past, place over value, object over subject, preposition over adjective. The phenomenology of the adjective here, to be overcome by the phenomenology of the preposition there. A contest between history and geometry that chooses as battlefield the grounds of humanism, the discourse on humanism as a pretext for the late-twentieth-century version of the subjugation of history by geometry? The metaphorical subtext of the discourse on humanism thus unravels a popularized version of Husserlian eidetic reductionism in search of the purity of geometrics uncontaminated by the world of history and time. It is as if one crosses into a time zone of the past, as if Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* had never been written, as if the debate between Husserl and Heidegger had never taken place, as if Husserl had never written on the origins of geometry, as if Derrida had never written his introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*. This is particularly interesting since Derrida and Heidegger are more often than not invited to join rank and file in that destruction of humanism by geometrically constructive anti-humanists.<sup>16</sup> Late in the twentieth century then, and inadvertently or not, a metaphoric reactivating of a desire for the purity, simplicity, originality, and universality of spatial geometrics. Should the logics of reductionism, on its way towards an anti-humanist and beautifully symmetricized space, on its way towards geometricity and quantification, signal an ontic desire for a world devoid of qualities, values, presuppositions, and contingencies? This imaginarily hierarchized registering of experience into the symbolics of geometry and history, of prepositions and adjectives, is a tendency towards privileging a viewing of, or a gazing at, the world rather than sensuously interacting with the world, and it is an experiencing of the world on the basis of a single sense alone: the eye. The complexities and differentiations of experience pulsating in the many senses of our bodies in its interplay with the multiplicities of world and life structures are here, at the end of the twentieth century, at a historical threshold which wishes to relegate modernity to the past of history, again reduced to a phenomenology which is epistemologically reminiscent of the beginnings, and not of the ends, of modernity. Should Descartes' mathematization of consciousness, so ardently refuted by those professing difference in the name of difference, carry the day after all, and profitably? Should this tendency towards simplicity, reduction, and geometrization assist the much desired quantifiability of the unconscious and consciousness alike?<sup>17</sup>

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#### 4. RESISTANCE TO ILLITERACY

The current discourses, in the name of anti-humanism, against humanism, are posited on the ethical assumption that difference—multicultural, ethnic, and gender—needs to be put on the political, the cultural, the critical map.<sup>18</sup> These goals are noble ones. They seek affinities with a heritage of tolerance and differentiation, of a vision of humanity which seeks human equality because and in spite of cultural, ethnic, and sexual differences. Yet the methods applied in the search for differentiating practices enhance reduction and not differentiation. And these reductionist methods hardly present a challenge to the almost non-purveyable complexity of the present-day university, which stems from the complex systemic relations the university entertains, and necessarily entertains, with structures that lie beyond the domain of the university. So a discourse on humanism and the university that de-socializes the university by reducing it to the “English Institute” and which de-historicizes humanism in accordance with Heidegger’s reductive definition and wholesale rejection of humanism is indeed no challenge to the complexity of the question of humanism and the university. What I consider more serious is that this reductionism in method and conceptuality has great potential to feed into the critical illiteracy of contemporary students already immersed in a general climate of cross-cultural and political illiteracy. If critical illiteracy would lead to politically literate beings, and to democratic and participatory social action, the military-industrial-administrative complex would no doubt divert some of its \$1-billion-a-day defense budget and put it into the run-down American school system, the historic countdown of which has already begun. This process might not have to be irreversible. On the part of the knowledge-exchange agency, less conceptual and methodological reduction in favor of more differentiation might help to reverse that process.

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Yet the methods applied in the search for differentiating practices enhance reduction and not differentiation. And these reductionist methods hardly present a challenge to the almost non-purveyable complexity of the present-day university, which stems from the complex systemic relations the university entertains, and necessarily entertains, with structures that lie beyond the domain of the university. So a discourse on humanism and the university that de-socializes the university by reducing it to the "English Institute" and which de-historicizes humanism in accordance with Heidegger's reductive definition and wholesale rejection of humanism is indeed no challenge to the complexity of the question of humanism and the university. What I consider more serious is that this reductionism in method and conceptuality has great potential to feed into the critical illiteracy of contemporary students already immersed in a general climate of cross-cultural and political illiteracy. If critical illiteracy would lead to politically literate beings, and to democratic and participatory social action, the military-industrial-administrative complex would no doubt divert some of its \$1 billion-a-day defense budget and put it into the run-down American school system, the historic countdown of which has already begun. This process might not have to be irreversible. On the part of the knowledge-exchange agency, less conceptual and methodological reduction in favor of more differentiation might help to reverse that process.

The current anti-humanists, as we have seen some of them in action in the 1984/85 issue of *Boundary 2*, surely would not want to see themselves as a group that says farewell to social responsibility and political literacy. Yet on account of the general reductive critical practices they help to propagate, they are on the best way of doing so. What is missing, for instance, in the current anti-humanist discourse is an analysis of what the predominant discourse is; of how many different and differentiable levels there are. How the predominant discourse in literature or English departments differs from practices and discourses in other fields within the humanities, the social sciences, and the hard sciences, and what the relationship is between hegemonic fields and marginal fields; and what the relation of the university is to major sources of funding and wealth. These are projects that cannot be carried out solely by academics from the English department, no matter how much they claim, in the name of anti-humanism, to speak for the university and against humanism. In order to counter elitist, non-democratic practices, we need to build an alliance and form, next to and with intellectuals from the sciences and the



social sciences, a literate critical bloc. When it comes to the question of humanism and the university, we need the expertise of economists, scientists, physicists, and ecologists as well as intellectuals from the so-called social sciences and humanities to analyze the forms of hegemony which surround us, intersect in us, and in which we live. This alliance might help us to analyze to what extent we are complicitous, to what extent we construct philosophies of consent to that surrounding hegemony of interested power. Reductionist generalities, in methodologies and approach, when it comes to the university and the humanities are no longer in place. And perhaps it might be useful, in a final Weberian/Habermasian note, to remember that the apparently increasing decentralization in systems and sub-systems of the various fields of knowledge—a disparity which often finds expression in apparent incommensurabilities and incompatibilities of theories and bodies of knowledge—that state of affairs might well be the preferred strategy for an increasingly centralizing system to profitably function, to exercise, that is, and not to exorcise, hegemony.<sup>18</sup>

1. This article has profited from the editorial expertise of Peter Carravetta and from supportive dialogue with Sarah Pelmas and Timothy McGee. I thank all three of them.

2. Other evidence for my contention would be the “textual aftermath” to Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage Books 1988); Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1987), as it has taken place in a variety of journals, including the *New York Review of Books* (November 5, 1987; May 12, 1988; March 2, 1989; March 16, 1989;), and the *Profession* 88. See also Robert L. Stone, *Essays on ‘The Closing of the American Mind’* (Chicago: Review Press, 1989).

3. See Robert M. Rosenzweig, with Barbara Turlington, *The Research Universities and Their Patrons* (Berkeley: California UP, 1982), and Jürgen Habermas, “Die Idee der Universität—Lernprozesse,” in his *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987), 71-101.

4. Contrary to many of the contributors who do not specifically acknowledge their conceptual indebtedness to Heidegger when it comes to their definition of anti-humanism, William V. Spanos is, as usual, out-front. See his “Boundary 2 and the Polity of Interest: Humanism, the ‘Center Elsewhere,’ and Power,” in *Boundary 2* (Spring/Fall 1984), 173-215.

5. For an initial critical account of Heidegger's involvement, see Alexander Schwan, *Politische Philosophie im Denken Heideggers*, 2nd ed. (Opladen, Westdeutscher: Verlag, 1988). The first edition appeared as early as 1965 and was promptly repressed in the intellectual unconscious of Heidegger scholars. Victor Farias, *Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1989). For an apologetic account, if not outright supportive of Heidegger's political engagement, see Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger. Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 1988), and Heinrich Wiegand Petzet, *Auf einen Stern zugehen. Begegnungen und Gespräche mit Martin Heidegger 1929-1976* (Frankfurt: Societats-Verlag, 1983).

6. Bloom, "The German Connection," in his *Closing of the American Mind*, 141-56.

7. A study on the marginalization of Italian studies in the United States, which would analyze both coercive facts and consent to that state of affairs, is still outstanding. Recent developments in this area—particularly as they are being carried out by Peter Carravetta, Robert Casillo, John Paul Russo, Anthony Tamburri, and Robert Viscusi, with their concern for conditions of possibility and limitations of American/Italian and Italian/American ethnicity—suggest, however, a heightening of consciousness with respect to the marginalization of Italian studies both in its relation to cultural discrimination here in the United States and in its relation to the global economic status of Italy.

8. Martin Heidegger, "Brief über den Humanismus" (1947), in *Wegmarken*, Vol. 9 of Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976), 313-65.

9. For Antonio Gramsci's fascinating account of Italian humanism, see his intermittent entries on humanism, the history of intellectuals, and the state in the *Quaderni del Carcere*, which are being translated into English by Joseph Buttigieg. Gramsci approaches Italian humanism in its relation to the intellectuals on one hand, and in its relation to the non-formation of a centralized Italian state on the other. English anthologies of Gramsci's work providing an insight regarding this matter are *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1987), in particular 44-104 and 123-33, and *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, tr. William Boelhower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), 57-65.

10. Ernesto Grassi, *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism. Four Studies* (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1983).

11. For a fascinating account of the trajectory of materialist philosophy in Italy, see Hermann Ley, *Studie zur Geschichte des Materialismus im Mittelalter* (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1957). To Edmund Jacobitti I owe the insight that a different trajectory of Italian philosophy could be drawn altogether: one which would see in the great figures of Italian philosophy (Machiavelli, Vico) an insistence on contingency, political philosophy, and practice rather than on rationality and Platonic-Cartesian thinking.

12. For Blumenberg, see his *Aspekte der Epochenschwelle: Cusaner and Nolaner, Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*, and *Der Prozess der theoretischen Neugierde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), and in particular his *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979). For Garin, see his many outstanding studies on Italian humanism, in particular *Scienza e vita civile nel Rinascimento italiano* (Bari: Laterza, 1972), *L'umanesimo italiano* (Bari: Laterza, 1975), *Lo zodiaco della vita. La polemica sull'astrologia dal Trecento al Cinquecento* (Bari: Laterza, 1976), and *Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1976). For Gramsci, see note 9.

13. William B. Spanos, *Boundary 2* (Spring/Fall 1984), 198.

14. For De Sanctis, see *Scelta di scritti critici*, ed. Gianfranco Contini (Torino: Unione tipeditrice torinese, 1959); as well as Francesco de Sanctis (1817-1883),

*Autobiografia, critica e politica*. (Torino: G. B. Paravano, 1924). For Gramsci's indebtedness to De Sanctis, see his "Back to De Sanctis," in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, cit. in note 9.

15. Saveria Chemotti, *Umanesimo, Rinascimento, Machiavelli nella critica gramsciana* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1975) has been very helpful for my understanding of Gramsci's pages on humanism and the Renaissance, including the figure of Machiavelli. The trajectory of humanism in Italy during fascism is largely based on Gramscian readings of that period. The German trajectory of humanism during fascism is based on intermittent discussions with Jost Hermand, Robert Holub, and my German family.

16. Derrida's essay, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils," *Diacritics* (Fall 1983), is one of the preferred referential texts in this context. As far as Heidegger is concerned, see note 4.

17. The most advanced and incisive work on the sociability and politicality of the unconscious is being done in the realm of feminist critical theory. In this context, see *Feminism as Critique*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987), in particular 56-77.

18. Many of the essays included in *Boundary 2* (Spring/Fall 1984) make distinct political and ethical claims. See, i.e., Abdul R. Jan-Mohamed's "Humanism and Minority Literature: Toward a Definition of Counter-Hegemonic Discourse," 281-99; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," 333-58; In *Boundary 2* (Winter/Spring 1985), see David Lloyd, "Pap for the Dispossessed: Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity," 319-42. For non-Western views on humanism, as far as the positioning of the authors is concerned, see V. M. Tarkunde, *Radical Humanism: The Philosophy of Freedom and Democracy* (Ajanta Publications, India, Jawahar Nagar, 1983), and M. Peetrovskiy, *Humanism: Its Philosophical, Ethical and Sociological Aspects* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972).

19. The complexity of the space of the university within larger social and economic systems is at issue in the above mentioned *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung* by Jürgen Habermas. See also his *Die Neue Unübersichtlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), in particular 141-67 on the crisis of the welfare state and the concomitant exhaustion of utopian energies.