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“Beneath and Beyond the ‘Crisis in the Humanities’”
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I.

One of the many curious facts about academic life in America is that very few people who work in the humanities ever think about them. Unlike departments, the category of the humanities seems even to humanists themselves a mere administrative convenience, a kind of phantom entity rather than a real principle of identity; and like all things administrative, it is resisted with indifference. The humanities are something like “North America,” a level of organization with neither the urgency of the local nor the grand significance of the global.

But to many outside the university, it is the departmental structure that seems arbitrary and even artificial, while the larger classifications—humanities, social sciences, mathematics, and natural sciences—really describe something. From this point of view, the distinctions between the fields of the humanities are less important than the features they hold in common. Scholars working in the humanities would be well advised to sensitize themselves to this point of view; for if, in addition to thinking of themselves as specialists in a given discipline, they could also think of themselves as humanists, they could see how their work contributed to a larger project, how its distinctive emphasis fit together with others both humanistic and non-humanistic. They would then be in a better position to understand their actual and potential contributions to knowledge as a whole and even to the culture at large. They would, in other words, be better able to address one of the most stubborn dilemmas in higher education, the perennial *crisis in the humanities*.¹

Virtually every survey of American higher education over the past half-century has noted this crisis. Almost since the time of the Hindenburg, it seems, scholars have

been crying, “Oh, the humanities!” Sometimes the crisis—whose dimensions can be measured by declining numbers of enrollments, majors, courses offered, and salaries—is described as a separate and largely self-inflicted, catastrophe confined to a few disciplines; sometimes it is linked to a general disarray in liberal education, and sometimes to the moral collapse and intellectual impoverishment of the entire culture. But one point emerges with considerable regularity and emphasis: humanistic scholars, conflicted and confused about their mission, suffer from an inability to convey to those on the outside and even to some on the inside the specific value they offer to public culture; they suffer, that is, from what the scholar and critic Louis Menand calls a “crisis of rationale.”ⁱⁱ

Curiously, and disturbingly, Menand, a prominent humanist himself, sees no easy way out of this crisis and makes no attempt to formulate what he describes as the missing rationale for humanistic study. He is especially vexed by the “predictable and aimless eclecticism” fostered by a contemporary mood of “post-disciplinarity,” in which tenured scholars feel licensed to abandon their training in order to pursue such topics as (in Menand’s hypothetical example) “the history of carrots, written in the first person.” If the professors abandon their disciplines, Menand notes, students facing an uncertain economic future might well wonder why they should devote themselves to reading literature, history, or philosophy.

Talk of crisis has been around for so long, however, that it has become simply incorporated into the most accustomed ways in which humanistic scholars understand themselves and their work. Once considered an affliction, crisis has become a way of life. What would the humanities be without their crisis? So inured have scholars in the humanities become to talk of crisis that many have almost been content to have a crisis rather than a rationale; in fact, it sometimes seems that the crisis *is* the rationale in that some scholars seem less interested in exposing students to the wisdom of the ages, the magic of art, and the rigors of history than they are in being observed in a dramatic, and sometimes entertaining, state of self-doubt.

A clearly articulated rationale for humanistic inquiry would, however, help displace the attention from the professor to the profession, and also to focus the profession’s attention on the community whose support it seeks and whose long-term

interests it aspires to serve. An inability or unwillingness on the part of humanists to give some account of their work that makes apparent its distinctiveness and value to the larger culture, on the other hand, actually damages the disciplines themselves and makes it more likely that the humanities, currently hanging on to “North-American” status, might actually begin to assume the status of South or Central America.

II.

If traditional rationales for humanistic study were to be condensed into a single sentence, that sentence might be the following: *The scholarly study of documents and artifacts produced by human beings in the past enables us to see the world from different points of view so that we may better understand ourselves.* This banal formulation may seem to have limited interest for us, but if we probe it a bit we can discover, preserved in the amber of tradition, elements that retain a certain enduring and even unexplored vitality. Examined closely, the sentence contains three distinct premises, that the humanities have the text as their object, human beings as their subject, and self-understanding as their purpose.

1. *Textuality.* As a valuable 1981 study of *The Humanities in American Life* authored by the Commission on the Humanities says, “the humanities employ a particular medium . . . the medium is language,” specifically textual language. I believe that the word “employ” refers directly to humanistic scholarship, and somewhat less directly to the materials being studied, which can be texts either in the narrow, literal sense or in the more expansive sense that emerged about forty years ago, in which any material artifact—a cityscape, a carved bone, an earthwork, even a spoken word—could be considered a text. The key fact is pastness: as the authors say, the “turn of mind” distinctive of the humanities is “toward history.”ⁱⁱⁱ Once again, this formulation pertains to both the practice and the object of humanistic scholarship: humanists study documents produced in the past, and produce, in turn, other documents destined to become part of the historical record.

This textual-historical orientation sometimes gives to the humanities a backward-looking cast, especially by comparison with an image-and-technology-dominated mass culture. In such a context, the text-dependency of the humanities has sometimes seemed an archaic holdover, like a vestigial tailbone in primates. Feeling vulnerable on this point, humanists have responded either with an uncritical embrace of technology or with a stubborn defense of traditional textuality, neither of which has served them especially well.

The concept of the text is not neutral or natural, and is therefore not immune to criticism. As Richard Lanham pointed out in 1993, the printed text bears within itself a certain ideology, encouraging what he regarded as dangerously deceptive illusions about the possibility of objectivity and the separability of mind and voice. By comparison, he argued, technology restores to discourse the enlivening qualities of consciousness, mobility, play, and personality. An accomplished rhetorician, Lanham confirmed the experiences of web-surfers as they navigate the sprawling networks of information unfurling before them, experiencing the heady sensation that they are becoming more spontaneous, improvisational, and even creative than seems possible while merely staring at a book. The comparison Lanham and others drew could hardly be more extreme: on the one side, the dead text, wedged in among countless others in the catacombs of the library, requiring a sterile discipline of linear tracking by a solitary reader; and on the other, the live electronic network, with virtual arcades of possibilities created moment by moment by our own choices, our own desires, our own improvisatory expertise—the medium itself seeming to hold out a promise of infinite, immediate, transparent, and universal communication. Comparing the traditional form of the printed text with the vital and adaptive information networks available on the web, Lanham warned that if humanists could not find a way to accommodate themselves to the new age, they might not survive its advent; or as he put it, “the ‘humanist’ task may pass to other groups while the humanities dwindle into grumpy antiquarianism.”^{iv}

In weighing this argument, we must be careful to distinguish between the book and the text. New media may represent a radical departure from the traditional form of the book, but textuality as such survives the technological revolution intact. Indeed, one might even suggest that electronic technology does not replace the text but actually

extends and supplements certain features of textuality by increasing our power to switch between texts of various kinds, and to take in writing, image, and sound at once. This retention of the text is a very good thing, because textuality carries with it a number of invaluable entailments unrecognized by Lanham and others who celebrate the technological revolution as a fundamental alteration in the concept of information itself.

The material stability of the text, in both traditional and electronic environments, implies a reassuring possibility of definite knowledge; and since the text represents intentions and agency, this implication extends to things not directly present to our senses. Reading a text, we are encouraged to seek the truth by observation, inference, and speculation, and are fortified in thinking that our search can produce results. Moreover, the very inertness of the text, its material indifference to our needs, helps produce that peculiar kind of intellectual pleasure distinctive of reading, a kind of weightlessness or freedom from immediate concerns; and we realize this benefit even in an electronic environment where we are not limited to the form of the book. This pleasure is accompanied, especially for the scholar, by a distinct sense of power. Since the truth of the past exists largely in textual traces, it must be assembled in the present, and can always be reassembled from a different point of view, with different emphases, presumptions, and priorities. In return for their focused attention on the object, readers—especially scholarly readers—are granted a license for a highly pleasurable act of synthetic speculative understanding that goes well beyond what is immediately or indisputably given.

Since it is, in theory, equally accessible to all readers, the text is also a public medium, creating around itself an invisible community of those who have or may yet read it. All texts are written from within some cultural tradition, and most groups or individuals look to the archive of the past for keys to their heritage and thus to their identity. But even though the access to a given text is determined by a host of local and contingent factors, the community implied by textuality itself is inclusive rather than exclusive because it is predicated on a particular kind of action rather than on identity. Indeed, one enters this community only after implicitly agreeing to submit to a task of reading that is in some ways depersonalizing in that it involves a provisional suspension of identity, and even, in certain cases, puts that identity at risk by subjecting it to new

information, new stimuli, new questions, new stresses. The world pours forth from texts in response to disciplined interest.

And so, although reading may awaken or refine elements of our individual character, and although the information we glean from texts may be highly particular, the fact that reading is a labor that all can, in theory, undertake means that the heritage we glean from texts is a human as well as a local possession: textuality as such is organized around the principle of universal communication across time and space, and constitutes a continuous and theoretically unbounded archive. That quintessentially American figure, Thoreau, had absorbed a vast range of knowledge from traditions other than his own, including classical philosophy and history; his “On Civil Disobedience” was read eagerly by that definitively Indian figure Gandhi, who learned from him the principles of nonviolent protest; this philosophy was then absorbed by a theology student in Chester, Pennsylvania named Martin Luther King, who gave it memorable expression in the course of that characteristically American protest movement, the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, struggles that were directly inspirational to Nelson Mandela and others fighting apartheid in South Africa.

No responsible scholar believes that humanistic study directly fosters private virtue and responsible citizenship. On the other hand, most scholars do believe that by engaging in humanistic study, they are doing something worthwhile in a larger sense; they are simply uncertain how to connect this larger public good with their private scholarly activity. In a penetrating assessment of “Humanities and the Library in the Digital Age,” Carla Hesse makes a fresh attempt, arguing that traditional textuality provides a “space of reflexivity” that takes concrete form in libraries, “our most cherished spaces of contemplation and reflection upon human values.”^v Especially by comparison with the ecstasies that greeted the first days of the internet, the state of mind associated with reading a book is stubbornly anti-utopian in part because of the measured pace of reading. This pace, which can seem to be out of step with a world devoted to the principle of acceleration, is, Hesse argues, deeply rooted in the history of our democratic ideals. As a “*slow* form of exchange,” she says, the book implicitly “conceives of public communication not as action but rather as reflection upon action” (115). A “logic of deferral” structures books, and this deferral opens a space for a “deep investigation,

concentration, reflection, and contemplation” (116). Hesse links the capacity for self-reflection with self-representation and self-constitution, and therefore with self-governance. She concludes this majestic argument with the assertion that the humanities, rooted in a principle of reflective delay that is rendered almost visible in the book, reinforce and promote, even if they cannot guarantee or secure, the development of “accountable citizens of a democracy” (117).

The fact that we have access to the past only through texts suggests that the past is not a constant, pressing burden, but a subject that engages our attention on a voluntary basis. We can, if we choose, close the book—or log off. And so, even without claiming that the humanities have a direct positive impact on private character or public citizenship, we may say that the textual emphasis of the humanities implies, as it were, the possibility of truthful knowledge (and the symmetrical, equally bracing, possibility of error), the act of reflection, and democratic citizenship, and fosters as well a sense of freedom and power opening onto an undiscovered future.

2. *Humanity*. According, once again, to *The Humanities in American Life*, “The essence of the humanities is a spirit or an attitude toward humanity. . . . [The humanities] show how the individual is autonomous and at the same time bound, in the ligatures of language and history, to humankind across time and throughout the world” (3). A generation after these fine phrases were written, it is easy to detect in them a certain worldview, emphasizing both individual autonomy and universal harmony, that may reflect “American life” at the dawn of the Reagan era more accurately than it does the humanities as such. The formulation does, however, contain a germ of constant truth in its insistence that the humanities are inconceivable without some idea of the human.

This idea is, I think, usefully indicated by a statement made by the first director of the National Humanities Center, the philosopher Charles Frankel, who said in 1978 that “The humanities are that form of knowledge in which the knower is revealed. All knowledge becomes humanistic when we are asked to contemplate not only a proposition but the proposer, when we hear the human voice behind what is being said.”^{vi} These sentences do many things at once, with an appearance of unstressed ease. First, they liberate the humanities from a given set of academic disciplines by stressing a “form of

knowledge” that can be found in any discipline.^{vii} The study of the law, for example, is not part of the humanities, but when legal scholars trace the evolution of the thought of a Holmes, a Marshall, a Frankfurter, they are approaching the law humanistically, as the product of a “human voice.” Even mechanisms can be approached in this way. In Michael Ondaatje’s great novel *The English Patient*, a British officer during WWII instructs a young man on how to defuse undetonated bombs. “People think a bomb is a mechanical object, a mechanical enemy,” he says; but if you want to survive, you must consider the bomb and its detonating device as a tactic, a piece of strategy designed to confuse, and then to kill, the person attempting to defuse it. You must learn to see the bomb humanistically; or as he puts it, “you have to consider that somebody made it.”^{viii} If even bomb detonation can be humanistic, even literary study may be mechanistic: bibliography, prosody, or some forms of textual editing, for example, are aspects of a humanistic discipline, but to the extent that they set aside the “human voice,” they cannot, on Frankel’s account, be considered properly humanistic.

One could quibble about such matters endlessly, but the larger point is that scholarship in the humanities is defined by its concern with the subject of humanity. Humanists operate on a human scale; they treat their subjects not as organisms, cells, or atoms, nor as specks of animate matter in the vast universe—nor, for that matter, as clients, patients, customers, or cases—but as self-aware individuals conscious of their existence. Humanistic knowledge is centered in texts (in the broadest sense of the term) produced by human beings engaged in the process of reflecting on their lives. At the core of the humanities is the distinctively human capacity to imagine, to interpret, and to represent the human experience.

And so, beneath the fact-oriented focus on the text (Frankel’s “proposition”) is a more speculative engagement with the process by which the text was produced, the creative act of “the proposer,” with all its contexts. This emphasis on the human act of creation is not uncontroversial; it has, in fact, been one of the most contentious issues in intellectual history over the past century, as one discipline after another has sought to modernize (or postmodernize) itself by eliminating the human voice from the object of study. For much of the past generation in particular, the prevailing feeling among advanced theorists has been that the very notions of human being, human nature, and

human voice—not to mention the individual human subject—are nothing more than ideologically generated mystifications. As an alternative, many thinkers tried to produce a pure description of linguistic or discursive facts. Attempts to construct a “history without human nature” (Michel Foucault), to describe an “inhuman” language (Paul de Man), or to trace the movements of an ideological “process without a subject” (Louis Althusser) represented some of the great triumphs of this point of view, triumphs that really did create a crisis in the humanities because they resulted in humanistic disciplines becoming more and more technical, empirical, and analytic—and doing so, strangely enough, while some scientific fields were taking up issues traditionally allotted to philosophy.

The issue came to a head in a 1970 debate on Dutch television between the scientific linguist Noam Chomsky, speaking in English, and the philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, speaking French. One can only wonder what the original viewers made of this event, but in the years since 1997, when a translation of the transcript was finally made widely available to English readers, the debate has become recognized as a rare occasion when two extraordinary minds engaged each other directly and at length at the level of fundamental principles, with Chomsky arguing for a concrete account of human nature as the indispensable foundation for any kind of political or ethical vision, and Foucault insisting that “human nature” was a sentimental illusion held over from an earlier, less critical, less scientific era.^{ix} The long discussion at last converged on the question of the ends of social struggle. For Chomsky, justice was the single goal of protest, while, for Foucault, power was the only plausible motive. In a statement that lingers in the mind, Foucault declared to an appalled Chomsky that, “one makes war to win, not because it is just” (136). I cannot fully represent here the nuances of this debate, but it is clear that Foucault’s account is singularly impoverished as an explanation of anything that happens in the human realm and seems more suited to explaining events in the animal or even the vegetable world, in which the reasons for acting are unmediated by any consideration of higher purposes or ultimate ends. With respect to the human world, Foucault explains effects, perhaps, but not causes: his account abruptly short-circuits the inquiry into motivation by eliminating the mass of reasons, rationales, and rationalizations that determine human will or intentionality. Chomsky’s insistence not

only on “justice” but, in a larger sense, on the place of ideas and ideals points to an indispensable humanistic premise, that human action is not entirely blind, but is informed by arguments and undertaken for reasons that, unlike “making war to win,” are not immediately apparent or directly manifest in the action itself. This assumption of *depth* in human action and indeed in human being constitutes one of the most crucial premises of humanistic inquiry.

The concept of depth also leads directly to one of the salient features of the human mind, and the key to the “conception of the human” that is reinforced by humanistic study, the fact that the mind operates on many levels or modalities at once, including many of which it is unaware. Human intentionality is irreducibly complex; it can never be grasped by a single principle of explanation. Many would accept this proposition when applied to large-scale collective actions such as the French Revolution, the Cold War, or the Great Depression, but it is just as true of actions committed by an individual, of individual expressions, and even of texts written by individuals. As a product of human agency, the text is a record of many intentions and processes, some available to the author in the form of consciousness, and others that are hidden and strictly unconscious. In literary study, as in legal theory, the “original intent” of the author is sometimes advanced as the ultimate explanatory principle, but conscious intentions are remarkably difficult to establish, hard to sort out, and often altogether irrelevant.

For most texts, we can safely presume that the author intended to write these particular words, but not why. The reasons one may have for writing are legion: to pursue fame, wealth, or sexual success; to impress the world as a clever person; to give voice to the wisdom of the nation; to prove that one is not the little fool one’s mother had always thought one to be; to redeem one’s reputation from the disaster of the last book; to pass the time by writing rather than by undertaking some more arduous pursuit, to fill one more page with writing before knocking off for lunch. Such intentions may be vividly present to the author; they may alternate or mingle with each other and with countless others over the course of composition; they may determine a great deal about the text—and yet they may never crest the surface of the text, may never find direct expression at all. They may in fact be unrecoverable, especially by comparison with unconscious

intentions, by which I mean not only the classical Freudian traumas, but also a host of other energies of which the author is never fully conscious. The social, historical, economic, and ideological systems in which we all swim without really being aware of them can, to a retrospective examination, actually be more legible in, and therefore more revealing about, a text than the author's conscious intentions when writing. Recognizing that texts are determined, and overdetermined, by forces of which the author is not consciously aware, the humanistic approach begins with the assumption that the text requires multiple explanations, each of which might be an answer to a different question.

Overdetermination, the premise that the real forces determining the text exceed anything the author could consciously know, means that human behavior and expression have a virtually infinite capacity to respond to queries put to them, and exceed any given explanation of them. If this were not true, we would long ago have stopped reading Joyce, Dickens, Shakespeare, Goethe, Austen, the Bible, or Homer, and would have replaced them with their definitive explanations, reaping the rewards of certain knowledge efficiently packaged. We would have contented ourselves with single histories, single biographies, single interpretations. But under the presumption that human behavior and expression are bottomless in their depth, humanistic study produces not certain but *uncertain* knowledge, knowledge that solicits its own revision in an endless process of refutation, contestation, and modification—a process of conversation. Humanists aspire to speak the truth, but none would wish to have the very last word, for such a triumphant conclusion would bring an end not just to the conversation but to the discipline itself.

The underlying aim of humanistic study is always to construct, through the materials provided by the text, an understanding of a human intention, an account of how and why this particular text came to be the way it is, the conditions under which the text emerged. We are not in search of the conscious mind of the historical author, something we can never fully know. We are trying to specify as far as possible the range and sensitivity of that mind, in both its conscious and unconscious dimensions. Milton, for example, thought himself to be a Puritan poet whose task was to justify the ways of God to man; but over a hundred years after he died, William Blake argued that Milton's sympathetic treatment of Satan demonstrated that the poet was "of the devil's party

without knowing it”; then, about a century and a half later, the critic William Empson argued that Milton was actually criticizing the moral character of God as the Bible represented it; a half century later, Stanley Fish demonstrated that the effect of reading *Paradise Lost* was to force the reader to venture interpretations that were subsequently discredited by the text—in other words “falling” and experiencing one’s own fallibility—so that the theological message of the poem was reinforced by the reader’s line-by-line experience. Each of these readings constituted not just an event in the history of Milton criticism, but also a moment in cultural self-understanding, as *Paradise Lost* was refashioned as a contemporary document, participating in contemporary debates. On each occasion, the image of the mind of Milton was reconceived as Milton was discovered to have a host of new intentions “without knowing it.”

On those fascinating occasions when the meaning of a canonical work is powerfully disputed and a new account advanced, the premises of humanistic scholarship as a whole are laid bare. On such occasions, what had passed for common sense about the past is overturned, and we are forced to confront an unsuspected volatility and depth in the text, in history, and in our view of history. We confront, that is, not just a new interpretation of a text, an event, a person, but the larger possibility that everything we had relegated to that species of inertia we call “the past” might be altered, even radically so.

This leads to a further point: that humanistic study inculcates a heightened awareness of our power over the past. Under normal circumstances, a desire to change the past is associated either with such counterfeiting romantics as Gatsby, who fabricates a glamorous history for himself, or with totalitarian dictatorships, with their encyclopedias in three-ring binders for easy elimination of patriots-now-adjudged-to-have-been-traitors. The protocols of scholarship—the rigorous observation of fact, the appeal to evidence, the conventions of public debate—can contain or regulate the potential for distortion implied in this power to alter the past, but they cannot eliminate it. Nor should they, for such power is the driving force behind our interest in the past in the first place. As Ernst Cassirer noted long ago, “symbolic thought”—the kind of thought in which the humanities specialize—is the best antidote to “the natural inertia of man,” and serves as the basis of man’s “ability to constantly reshape his human universe.”^x What

are we doing when we read, if not changing the past, and doing so for our own present purposes? In humanistic study, we confront not just our ancestors but also our own capacity for determining who our ancestors were, and thus for determining who we are or might become. This capacity should be treated like fire, with great respect for its power to create and to destroy.

3. *Self-understanding*. As Frankel indicates, the humanities are a “form of knowledge in which the knower is revealed.” This is the most vital and distinctive aspect of humanistic inquiry, but also the most mysterious and the most easily misunderstood. When people tout the moral value of the humanities—when they claim that the humanities inculcate principles of citizenship, refine one’s sensibility, or increase our distinctively human potential—they are claiming, in essence, that humanistic knowledge produces an identifiable positive effect on people. Frankel’s formulation is a useful corrective to this claim, for he does not say that humanistic knowledge improves the knower, only that it “reveals” the knower, a very different thing. This curious phrase refers to one of the effects of reading, with its responsibility to get it right, to apprehend the text without distortion or projection. Engaged in this project, we are subjected to a constant discipline in which we are implicitly required to examine and correct ourselves. To be sure, we would labor under the same imperative if the thing under inspection were a fossil, a meter reading, or a pitched baseball. But these tasks do not reveal the knower in the same way as approaching a text from a humanistic point of view. The crucial additional fact about that point of view is indicated by the presumption of “depth,” which implies that the text is the record of a human intention to communicate through the use of signs. Signs refer us back to a mind, and so bring us into the presence not just of significance—which could be attributed to a cloud, a bullet, a footprint, a snowflake—but of meaning. A deep object is a meaningful object; and it is in the process of examining the object, probing its depth and constructing the mass of intentions behind it, that we discover depth and meaning in ourselves.

To read is to struggle to understand a mind that struggled to express itself, and this shared struggle is one of the bases for communication between author and reader. To enter into silent dialogue with an author, we must suspend our distinct identities and

presume that his or her mind is like ours in this and perhaps other respects. We do not make the same presumption of equivalence about the people described in literary or historical works, and so have a less intimate relationship with them. Reading about people may enrich our imaginative *experience*, but reading words in search of the human presence behind them strengthens our imaginative *capacity*, forcing us to reenact in our own minds the drama of other minds and even to feel their thoughts and sensations as if they were our own. Identification with an author is considered by many scholars to be a primitive and pre-critical response, but no act of reading, no matter how sophisticated or advanced, can do without it, and the most powerful criticism has it in abundance. The criticism of Stephen Greenblatt on Shakespeare, Leo Steinberg on Michelangelo, Edward Said on Conrad, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on Henry James, and Helen Vendler on Keats has this in common, that it imparts not only detailed information about texts and their contexts, but also conveys a deeply personalized sense of intimacy or intellectual sympathy with a mind. When, in a defiant mood, humanists insist that their “soft” disciplines are actually *more* difficult and require *more* intelligence than the “hard” sciences, they are thinking about the discipline imposed by the other mind, which cannot be measured or directly observed, which is not necessarily self-aware or self-consistent, but which must still be somehow apprehended and understood. In the humanistic text, even “the facts” are humanized and must be grasped mind to mind as well as mind to object, and this difficult process exercises both the intellect and the imagination.

True humanistic scholarship insists on this double discipline, which untrained readers find easy to avoid. Consider, for example, the figure of Léon, the callow young clerk who becomes Emma Bovary’s lover in Flaubert’s great novel. Léon first earns Emma’s ardent trust in the course of a rapturous conversation on the power of literature to uplift the soul and touch the heart. “One thinks of nothing,” he says, “the hours slip by. Without having to move, we walk through the countries of our imagination, and your thought, blending with the fiction, toys with the details, follows the outline of the adventures. It mingles with the characters, and it seems you are living their lives, that your own heart beats in their breast.” “That is true!” Emma exclaims, “that is true!”^{xi} We fear for Emma at this point not just because we sense her dangerous attraction to a man who is not her husband, but also because Léon’s discourse suggests not a disciplined

understanding of the text that also yields an augmented self-knowledge, but a kind of free fall; we sense that he can lose himself without losing much, and that if Emma were to lose herself to him, she might lose everything.

One can also go wrong by failing to lose oneself at all, a failure given memorable form in the portrait of Emma's other lover, the callously opportunistic Rodolphe. At one desperate point, Emma tells Rodolphe that she loves him, that she will be his slave—sentiments that seem to him entirely appropriate, as he has heard them from a succession of mistresses. As Flaubert's narrator comments, "He was unable to discern, this man of so much experience, the nuances of feeling that may reside in common words" (*MB* 138). Hearing a formula for abject devotion, Rodolphe takes it at face value, indifferent to the possibility that the passionate and inexperienced Emma may have deployed conventional phrases to express feelings of great depth and poignancy. In Rodolphe, Flaubert describes a mind unable to surrender its own self-interest, incapable of exposing itself to the "human voice" of others—in short, a mind deficient in true humanistic sensibility. Rodolphe never makes a presumption of equivalence, never places himself on the same footing as others, never apprehends depth, never truly communicates. This may be why he is never shown in the act of reading, except when he peruses his own letter of farewell to Emma, a grossly duplicitous and hypocritical text whose rhetorical finesse he greatly admires. Rodolphe's wide experience has provided him with a certain cunning, but has locked him into himself. It is Flaubert's final, devastating point that the world does not punish such people, but torments their victims without end.

We can contrast both of these antihumanistic types, one deficient in intellect and the other in imagination, with Flaubert himself, who wrote in one of his famous letters to Louise Colet, "I am Madame Bovary." What could he have meant? Perhaps he was saying that he, like Emma, was pouring his heart out to the Léons and Rodolphes, not to mention the Charles Bovarys, of the world. He may have been confessing that his heroine was just a masked version of himself, confirming the recurrent suspicion of readers since Baudelaire that Emma has a "masculine" character. But the most productive explanation concerns the extreme state of empathetic identification he entered into while composing the novel, a state that caused him virtually to live the experiences of his characters, even to the point of having "a distinct taste of arsenic in my mouth"

when he wrote of Emma taking poison. Flaubert understood that vomiting one's dinner, as he did when writing of Emma's poisoning, is a form of hallucination dangerously close to insanity, but he understood, too, the difference between hallucination and a genuinely creative state of mind. "I know those two states perfectly," he wrote; "there is a gulf between them. In genuine hallucination there is always terror; you feel that your personality is slipping away from you; you think you're going to die. In poetic vision, on the contrary, there is joy. It is something that permeates you. Nevertheless, here too you lose your bearings."^{xii}

The mark of "poetic vision" is a sudden sense of creative power as one sheds one's limitations and enters into an expanded field of possibilities. Something of this sense, in diminished forms even farther from terror or hallucination, is available to readers, whose work is still creative, still imaginative, even though it results in no tangible product and merely comprehends the product of another. For the act of reading involves us not only in the experiences of the people described, but also, in its word-by-word tracking of the act of creation, in the life and mind of the writer as well. In this respect, too, humanistic understanding is inescapably dual—on the one hand, a liberation from the confines of the mundane self through an immersion in the lives and thoughts of others, a loss of bearings; and, on the other, a vicarious or secondary participation in the author's act of creation that enhances and strengthens our imaginative powers. These effects may seem to be limited to the individual reader, who is given a sense of pleasure and power without cost, and this ethos of self-enrichment was indeed the emphasis and the effect of much traditional humanistic pedagogy. But a new self-understanding can be experienced as an understanding of a new self, and a new relation to others. Such an understanding cannot always be confined to those still, sweet moments spent alone with a book. It is no accident that moments of great vigor in the world of humanistic scholarship are so often concurrent with transformational moments in society at large.

III.

With their orientation towards human acts of reflection and representation, their invitation to a loss of self, their investment in unconscious forces, and their confusion of intellect and imagination, the humanities represent by their very nature a crisis in that institution dedicated to research and knowledge, the academy. Each discipline within the humanities is also in a state of crisis, for the larger, discipline-transcending subject of humanity hovers over all of them, providing an ultimate justification for them but also making each seem fragmentary. History cannot tell us the whole truth about the past, nor literary study about literature, nor philosophy about truth. Each of these disciplines picks out a certain aspect of human existence, with the clear if implicit understanding that these aspects represent only segments of the totality. The concepts of the division of labor, collaboration, and codependence inform all of the humanistic disciplines, which are in principle porous and exposed to the others.

The humanities must understand this condition as its strength, not its weakness. They must insist on the possibility of trans- or multi-disciplinary approaches to fundamental problems. This insistence must extend, too, beyond the humanities. One of the most promising features of the present moment is the new urgency gathering at the interface of the humanities and non-humanistic disciplines as they confront not only such new subjects as genetic engineering, environmental trauma, and the cognitive capacities of animals or machines, but also, and most intriguingly, such traditional subjects as the origin of language, the grounding of ethical imperatives, and the distinctive features of a specifically human being. None of these subjects can be satisfactorily addressed by a single discipline, but all of them concern fundamental issues relating to humanity; and the humanities, whose special province is questions of meaning, history, and value, must now reconceive themselves as the natural sponsor of the debates and controversies that swirl around such issues. The confrontations that result from these debates will, in a sense, threaten the disciplines that engage in them, for the sovereignty or adequacy of each will be called into question by the others. But the promise of genuine advances in knowledge and the rejuvenation of the disciplines that accompany these advances more than compensates for this threat.

Paradoxically, these advances can only be made if the disciplines remain strong. Committed to partial knowledge and limited vision, the disciplines represent indispensable guardrails against runaway amateurism and what Menand called aimless eclecticism. “Postdisciplinarity” is clearly not the most productive response to a crisis in traditional disciplinarity, since what is needed today is more not less discipline, and stronger not weaker disciplines. Scholars in the humanities must not confuse a hospitality to innovation and reconfiguration with an indifference to rigor and accuracy, for it is only with the guidelines and conventions established by disciplines that progress in knowledge can be measured; indeed, the disciplines can only undertake in good faith the kind of internal self-revision that is periodically necessary if they are powerful and confident to begin with.

One sign of such power and confidence is a willingness to engage in dialogue with a non-academic audience, a willingness signaled by an approach to advanced thought that makes scholarship accessible to thoughtful people outside the discipline. Scholars cannot expect the public at large to be fascinated by specialist work, but one test of work in all fields is the degree to which it contributes in some identifiable way to a purpose beyond that of the accumulation of knowledge for its own sake. Humanists ought, I believe, to get in the habit of articulating the possible relations between the work they do and some purpose the non-academic public can understand. There is, of course, no guarantee that the public will approve of that purpose or the means of achieving it, but if the case is not made, the public can hardly be blamed for its indifference or even its distrust. Scholars might find it useful to think of their scholarly identity as but one of a nested series of identities, with each communicating with the others and accommodated within a single individual. If they performed this thought-experiment, they could then ask themselves how their scholarly work contributed to purposes that could be grasped by a citizen, a teacher, a parent, an institutional employee, a taxpaying citizen. And so, if I began by urging humanists to cultivate the view from the humanities rather than from the department or the specialist subfield, I would like to close by urging them to imagine, at least, an even larger perspective that looks still farther, out beyond the academy itself.

The humanities should represent both the conservation and accurate transmission of the past and the imaginative cultivation of the future. At every point in humanistic

inquiry, the actual meets the possible in an encounter whose results cannot be predicted in advance. “Crisis” in this sense is not a threat or a disaster but one, perhaps overly dramatized, way of describing a permanent feature of the humanities, one that humanists would do well not just to accept but to promote with all the resources at their command.

ⁱ “The humanities” as a designation for an area of knowledge or set of disciplines are a recent invention; the term does not appear, in the American academic context, until after WWII. Since the “crisis in the humanities” might be dated from the debate on the “two cultures” launched in 1959, when C. P. Snow attacked the distinctive “irrationality” that disqualified humanistic scholars from meeting the challenges of the times, the humanities enjoyed only about a decade when they were not in crisis; and even during this period—the period of the Korean War, the Cold War, McCarthyism, and the beginnings of the civil rights struggle—they may have been in crisis without realizing it. For subsequent formulations of the crisis, see J. H. Plumb, ed., *Crisis in the Humanities* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964); *Report on the Commission on the Humanities* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1964); and a subsequent report of the Commission on the Humanities, entitled *The Humanities in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) (hereafter *HAL*). This last report comments that “many would argue that the humanities are in crisis, and would describe this crisis as symptomatic of a general weakening of our vision and resolve” (3). See also Alvin Kernan, ed., *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) (hereafter *WHH*). The essay by Francis Oakley in this volume notes a “persistent drumbeat of educational commentary of the ‘eclipse of the liberal arts,’ ‘crisis of the humanities,’ ‘erosion of the humanities,’ ‘flight from the humanities’ genre” (“Ignorant Armies and Nighttime Clashes: Changes in the Humanities Classroom, 1970-1995,” *WHH* 63-83, 64). A Google search in April 2004 of “crisis in the humanities” yielded 410 items.

ⁱⁱ Louis Menand, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” ACLS Occasional Paper #49; see on-line at <http://www.acls.org/op49.htm>. This sense of a vacuum where a rationale should be is widely shared. In “Crisis in the Humanities,” Marjorie Perloff begins by asserting that most analyses of the crisis are either wholly pessimistic, lamenting the terminal condition of the humanities, or wholly instrumental, proposing limited institutional picker-uppers such as “making better contacts with the outside world,” or “redesigning graduate programs so as to accommodate the new community college market.” Both of these approaches sidestep the more fundamental questions about what the humanities are and what makes them valuable. See <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/articles/crisis.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ *HAL* 2.

^{iv} Richard Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 228.

^v Carla Hesse, “Humanities and the Library in the Digital Age,” *WHH*, 107-21, 112.

^{vi} Quoted in *HAL 2*.

^{vii} The authors of *HAL* note that, traditionally, the humanities were defined as “languages and literatures, history, and philosophy.” But the 1964 report by the Commission on the Humanities added the arts as well as “the history and comparison of religion and the law” and “those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods.” When the National Endowment for the Humanities was created in 1965, on the plan laid out in this report, the legislation authorizing it added linguistics, archeology, and ethics. See *HAL 2*.

^{viii} Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 192.

^{ix} Arnold Davidson, ed., *Foucault and His Interlocutors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 107-45.

^x Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 62.

^{xi} Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. and trans. Paul de Man (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 59 (hereafter *MB*).

^{xii} Quoted in Hippolyte Taine, *De l'intelligence*, 2 vols. (1870); cited in Roger Shattuck, ““Think Like a Demigod,”” *New York Review of Books*, 13 June 2002, 25-27: 27.