

Life among Conceptual Characters

A letter to conclude the special issue of *New Literary History* on “Recomposing the Humanities—with Bruno Latour”

Paris
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Dear Rita and Stephen,

Thank you for allowing me to conclude this set of papers with some personal—and I am afraid not terribly coherent—reflections on, or rather recollections of, my own encounters with what has been called the “humanities” in this symposium you have so kindly assembled. As you know, in French the word “les humanités” is no longer very common, and it certainly doesn’t refer to an organized field that is to be promoted, defined, or defended against other disciplines. So it would make no sense for me to situate myself inside the field of “les humanités.” This is why, following your suggestion, I would rather reminisce on my own connections with what French people would call “littérature,” “écriture,” “style,” “texte,” “textualité” in their relation to thought and politics—a series of links so typical of French culture that it will probably appear amusingly exotic to your readers. Please take the following attempt as no more than an ethnographic testimony to a quickly disappearing culture of writing.

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ODDLY ENOUGH, I AM ABLE TO date with a perfect degree of precision my connection with writing as a thought-producing activity: *October 13, 1961*. Even the hour—7 p.m.—is inscribed on the cover page of the first of my personal diaries! As far as I can tell, the fourteen-year-old writer had already made the connection between writing and thinking since he had penned as an incipit: “J’y noterai tous les soirs mes activités et surtout mes pensées” (I will report what I do and above all my thoughts). The “above all” is especially pleasant since

at this early age he had no thought whatsoever to jot down! At least not yet. Because, as everyone in the field of humanities suspects, thinking *follows* and does not *precede* writing—at least this highly specific form of thinking associated with mid-century bourgeois European techniques of scribbling. Considering that today I am taking notes in a (by now digital) notebook numbered 212, this means I have been allowed for the last fifty-five years to continuously learn what I should think through the deciphering of some twenty thousand pages of personal *pattes de mouche*!

If I don't need to belabor the point, this is because Jean-Paul Sartre in *Les Mots* marvelously diagnosed the bootstrapping operation by which a thinking subject is generated out of a neurotic obsession with penning page after page. Who is the writer? The one who is fabricated by writing. In the twentieth century, some bourgeois children could learn to become subjects and to “have thoughts” because they wrote as much as they read from their parents' libraries. If “reading is an unpunished vice,” writing is the symptom of quite a few perversions. Although I am two generations younger than Sartre, it is fair to say that I have inherited the same atmosphere conducive to the various vices of a self-generating writing.

The formative nature of writing private diaries, especially by adolescents, is a well-known phenomenon of Western media culture. Filling in blank pages allows for a distance to be introduced from the saturated world of daily existence. Writing diaries is like carving for yourself a breathing space, providing that it remains protected from any one's else reading (something probably lost today with blogs and selfie-filled Facebook posts). My father (1903-1982) was a serious bibliophile, who read the classics out loud to us every weekend, and who had the good fortune of being trained by Jacques Copeau (1879-1949), the “renovator of French theater,” when he retired in my native Burgundy in the neighboring village of Pernand-Vergelesses. But even in the midst of a large, loving, and literate family, or I should rather say, *because* of this constant shower of privileges, a kid does need a breathing space. How would have I survived otherwise, with seven siblings and hundreds of cousins, nieces, and nephews? However, while most diarists abandon their task after a while, once they have “solved their psychological problems,” some continue, morphing progressively from a notary of trifles to a tester of surprising arguments.

And if there is one phenomenon I have never stopped wondering at, it's the countless surprises generated by the very material act of writing. How bewildering for a young soul to decipher the obscure oracles written by his own fountain pen—and to discover that the only way to interpret them is to scribble one more page! (I think I have managed over the years to share such a wonder with students at every session of

my “PhD writing workshop”—the only really useful pedagogical set of exercises I have ever devised. Is it not strange that professors claim to teach PhD students to “think” and “study” without ever directing their attention to the subterranean act of writing—which is not to be confused with obeying a format or looking for a “good style”?)

So I hope you will recognize that although this writing mania is not a connection with the field of “the humanities” as such (I have no expert knowledge of any novelist or poet and I am deeply ignorant of contemporary literature), it is a serious encounter with *textuality*. Let me now mention some of the steps that seem to have helped me deepen this peculiar entry into the materiality of writing.

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Retrospectively, what probably made me insist even more on such a connection between writing and thinking was my encounter, in the last year of high school, with Nietzsche’s philosophy. This might require some explanation. My parents, well aware of the limits of Beaune’s provincial *lycée*, sent all their kids, girls as well as boys, to Jesuit schools in Paris for the “classe de terminale” in order to acquire the indispensable Parisian cachet. Oddly enough, our teacher, Monsieur Detape, had chosen that year to cover the whole curriculum by making us read large doses of Nietzsche, from *The Birth of Tragedy* to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* through to *The Gay Science*—a book that I ended up knowing almost by heart.

I was immediately taken by Nietzsche’s idea that all philosophical and even scientific concepts are worn-out metaphors. For him, there is no real difference between the literal and the figurative meaning of a word. Or rather the literal meaning of a concept is nothing but the excision of one of the many figurative meanings still active in the background. But I was also completely seduced (Nietzsche is the philosopher of eighteen-year-olds wishing to be seduced, not one you continue reading at sixty-nine), by his manner of putting such an argument into practice: by highlighting the figurative within the literal, Nietzsche never allowed concepts to break their ties with the ways in which they were written. Philology, for him, was a synonym of philosophy and a much more exacting discipline. And to philosophy he added his always-present style—and also his ever-present rage. Ideas had flesh. After all, Zarathustra is the best example of what Deleuze and Guattari have called “conceptual characters,” a term I have chosen for the title of this little piece.

That concepts were also characters is a lesson I never forgot, and it immunized me completely against analytical philosophy, whose supposed

obsession with language struck me, on the contrary, as a total insensitivity to style. If there are any key differences left between French and American thinking cultures, this one strikes me as really decisive: attention to *language* is not at all the same thing as an attention to *writing*. They put their ideas into writing; we write books. A point made over and over again by Derrida. (Incidentally, the attention to style per se has been reinforced for me by the obligation to write in English, a sure way to always sense the weight, limit, opacity, and tropism of language. If you don't write in your mother tongue, you have to resort to that of your wicked stepmother!—and to always rely on friends' help.)

Even though I was a Derridean for a whole year after reading *Of Grammatology* (a key influence on the later notion of scientific *inscription*), the next step in my embedding of concepts in the ways they are generated—this unfolding of thought into a highly specific sort of materiality—was the discovery of biblical exegesis at the University of Burgundy with my teacher André Malet (1920-1989), the translator and indeed the exegete of Rudolf Bultmann in France. This time it was not only philosophy, but the very flesh of religious beliefs, emotions, scruples, and passions—a key preoccupation of my youth—that suddenly found an empirical and realistic grounding. In the same way that Nietzsche had shown that concepts never leave behind their stylistic embodiment, I realized that religious beliefs can never be detached from the complex trajectory of interpretation, rewriting, invention, reprise, fabrication, canon formation, and institutional incorporations that allow statements to gain a meaning. It was my first encounter with the idea that what I now call regimes of truth have their own “key” and that, once this key has been grasped, comparisons between truth conditions are made possible. By looking carefully at “enunciation regimes” (the term I used for many years), I ensured that statements could not escape into never-never land.

You can perhaps understand the weight of these two lessons for someone who witnessed every day, in his own obsessively filled notebooks, the same transubstantiation of ink into argument. This peculiar form of *empiricism*—what I take now, retrospectively, because you, Rita and Stephen, have asked me to reflect on it, as a highly specific form of *realism*—was born from those encounters.

Or rather this brand of realism came from the decision, made in 1970, to marry the woman with whom I was absolutely sure that, no matter what, by relying on her compass, I would never be allowed to fly away from reality—a decision whose impact, over forty-five years, has dwarfed all other intellectual or literary influences. (It is a striking feature of life that influences proceed mostly *backward*, reversing chains of causality: consequences *choose* what will cause them, as Deleuze reminded us with

his example of the sun and the plants. Before plants, he said, the Sun had no causal influence on them. Similarly, authors choose by what and by whom they will be influenced. This is why intellectual history is always a dubious and misleading business: it rubs history the wrong way.)

At this juncture, while all the determinations of my class, psychological makeup, milieu, and time were directing me to become an idealist intellectual, I ended up, thanks to these turns of fortune, going in the opposite direction: toward a form of rematerialization—what I called at the time *irreduction*. If I had felt, even before going to Africa and then to America, that “we have never been modern,” it was mostly because I had sensed that one’s picture of the world would be entirely different depending on whether one allowed thought to be autonomous or to embody a certain mode of materiality—yet a substance so radically different from what passed for “matter.” (It’s a strange but very common experience that you already know at an early age what you will learn in the future, something that could make you really believe in Plato’s myth of reminiscence.)

I had the feeling that any consideration was *abstract* as long as it could not follow the step-by-step trajectory that allowed one element to be made visible through the conspiracy of all the other elements still active in the background. This is probably the only insight I have ever had, the core of actor-network-theory as well as of the “inquiry into modes of existence.”

It also explains the pleasure I gained from ethnographic method—in itself a completely bizarre tropism for a bourgeois provincial philosopher who should have shied away from any excess of concreteness. In ethnography, just as in the careful word-for-word exegesis of a philosophical text, I could finally follow, step by step, how a specific “action” could be made possible by its “network” (to use rather poor words). Don’t fly, don’t jump, pay the price of each connection. And if you are lost, write and write again, describe and describe some more (a portrait of the analyst as a “serial redescriptor,” as Michael Witmore would say).

To put it another way, I had the certainty that *agency* could not be extracted from style, any more than the actor from its network, or the concept from its character. I have difficulty in expressing myself well (I am not good at introspection) and maybe I am disappointing you, but it is not literature taken as a *field* that made me redirect my attention toward an empirical emphasis, but literature, or rather philosophy, nested inside acts of writing. The only writer that would be recognizable as a clearly “literary influence” on my work is Charles Péguy (1873-1914), but you see how highly peculiar a choice that could be: my own mixture of philosophy, sociology, and art, shaped by an author entirely obsessed by

the link between repetitive style, the dogma of incarnation, and a revision of socialist politics! An idiosyncrasy built upon another idiosyncrasy.

I have said enough to make you understand why I sank my teeth into semiotics like a mouse into cheese after I had the chance, in San Diego, to meet Paolo Fabbri. Scientific texts could be analyzed in the same way as biblical scriptures, but with another key. The view from nowhere could be folded back into an exegetic practice that left objectivity in its wake—or not—just as the exegesis of a biblical text generated salvation—or not. Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992) was just as important for me as Harold Garfinkel (1917-2011) was in social theory and for much the same reason: one never allowed ideas to leave narration, while the other grounded social concepts in locally produced ethnomethods.

Funnily enough, the systematic study of texts in this French tradition became what was imported into an American context as “Theory.” While on this side of the Atlantic, I took it as exactly the opposite of “theory”: as the chance to acquire an empirical method so as to avoid the flight of concepts into anything like “thought.” Just like exegesis, semiotics grounds thought in figures that can be described and studied step by step. The continuity of agency is no longer obscured by the multiplicity of its figurations. Or, to mix semiotic and Deleuzian parlance: actors, that is characters, emerge from actants, that is concepts.

In a move that I now recognize as typical of my emerging form of empiricism, I never took (Greimassian) semiotics as being limited to texts, but as a formidable toolbox for providing a handle on ontology. This is what opened up an access to science and technology that had rarely been facilitated before, to put it mildly, by the various brands of philosophy or literature. Hermeneutics could move out of texts, to things, to knowledge, to technology, and, finally, to the world. Since you have been so kind, Rita, as to explain better than I can the value of treating human and nonhuman characters with the same method and how such a move could be useful for the humanities, I can pass on quickly.

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What is the conclusion of this brief introspection? I became convinced that there is no way for any form of expression to transcend another so as to direct, cover, or explain it. Since you asked me to reflect on my use of literary figures and my dabbling in media other than writing—plays, performances, exhibitions—you may understand that they follow directly from this early conviction of mine. (If I answer your question rather clumsily, please remember that I was left completely in peace by

critiques and commentators until I was sixty. “Always forward,” such was my motto. Before Gerard de Vries’s invitation to come to Amsterdam and before Graham Harman’s book, no one had read me as a philosopher and even less as an *author*. I was just a sociologist, defending from time to time a few technical points of method. Which means I went from one project to the next, without having to reflect on my own trajectory—or, indeed, to take myself seriously.)

Michel Serres, whom I had met in California, had always insisted on a principle of method that fitted very well with my interests: *explanans* is always lodged deeply in *explanandum*, or, in less pedantic terms, there is no metalanguage other than the language of those you try to interpret. Serres, a great orator, demonstrated this principle of method on poetry as well as scientific treatises in the smoke-filled “Amphithéâtre aux Vaches” at the Sorbonne every Saturday morning. Jean de La Fontaine’s *Fables* could be understood via the theory of information, just as much as Claude Shannon could be clarified through a comparative reading of La Fontaine. This is the peculiar form of *hermeneutics* that he associated with the conceptual character of Hermes. It was enough to free his auditors from the idea that there existed a wedge between the interpretation of texts and interpretation of things. To use a nice expression of Steven Connor’s that exactly fits Serres’s method: “a text cannot be *outwitted*.” Hence my distrust of critical distance and my preference for what I call *critical proximity*, a situation where you let your own interpretation be chemically dissolved by the “object” of your study.

I was struck by the beauty of such an “anthropology of science” just as much as I was later, after having delighted in the writing of *Aramis or the Love of Technology*—my somewhat disregarded but favorite piece of work—by Richard Powers’s novels. His *Galatea 2.2*, carried out, with much greater efficacy, the same exploration of what the agency of technology meant for the agency of humans. (It also helped me to measure the infinite distance between what I was able to write in my hesitant Frenglish and what a real writer could do with language.)

If you now ask me why I allowed myself to enter into relations with other media, it is precisely because I learned from all those influences that *there is no metalanguage*. This does not mean that philosophy is useless, or that an inquiry into an automated subway will not be needed, since Powers has delivered an amazing portrayal of how software could be animated. It simply means that *philosophy is a medium too*. As different from video as video is from painting, painting from writing plays, or writing plays from setting up lab experiments.

If I am not mistaken on this point, I might in the end have a contribution to make to the field of the humanities as you define it! Let me

phrase it as bluntly as I can: philosophy (let's say the humanities) is what allows us to *navigate* through *overlapping* media and contribute to their *composition*, for no other reason than the lightness and banality of its techniques: ordinary language just slightly modified. Not a terribly good definition, but one with which I have some experience.

Let me explain with an example. When in the Venice Biennale of 2009, I encountered Tomás Saraceno's "Galaxies Forming along Filaments, like Droplets along the Strands of a Spider's Web," I saw in his installation a technical, nay a philosophical solution, to the problem I had had with actor-networks: namely how do you generate actors—in his case quasi-bubbles—out of a network—in his case an elastic spider's web. It was also, in my eyes, a highly practical and beautiful solution to a critique Peter Sloterdijk, a thinker obsessed by spheres, enclosures, and globes, had aimed at my own tropism for networks and spaceless ontology. Saraceno managed to draw spheres out of nets. You understand that for a philosopher of monads, the overlapping nature of all these mediums is a crucial resource.

Had I found the hidden "structure" and the unconscious principle that was "guiding" Saraceno's work? Of course not. But I could show to some visitors and readers that Saraceno, Sloterdijk, and I, each with our own skills, had elaborated solutions that could *overlap* with each other.

It is not that a metalanguage extracts the meaning from a work of art—a meaning that, in theory, could be lodged inside any another form or expressed in a "literal" instead of a "figurative" form. It simply means that the medium of philosophy—a peculiar style of *linking arguments* together to avoid as many explicit non sequiturs as possible (is there another definition of this venerable Western writing tradition?)—that this medium is pretty good at *intensifying* some of the features that other mediums are also interested in sustaining. Philosophy does not lord it over other forms and does not explain anything: philosophy is a powerful medium in its own right that adds new forms to the others. Nothing more, nothing less. (A point that I think I have clarified in the "modes of existence" project by proposing the term *preposition*.)

Compared to writing a play (as I did with friends when we staged *Gaia Global Circus*) or curating a show, writing in a philosophical style is amazingly light. It does not require a big crew! And that's exactly the source of its strength. If artists and scientists are *chefs*, the philosopher is the *maitre d'hôtel*. A useful job, indeed, but suited only to those who have learned to stick to their place.

If knowledge is a mode of existence, and not a voice from nowhere that can be confused with the thing known (the origin of the idealist notion of matter), it is important to find ways to demonstrate this point

experientially. If I have chosen three times, thanks to the generous help and support of Peter Weibel, the ZKM director, to be a curator of “thought exhibitions” (designed on the model of “thought experiments”), it is not in order to “illustrate” philosophical ideas with works of art, but exactly for the opposite reason: to plunge philosophical ideas into the competing field of much more powerful works of art and see what will happen to all of them once they are in this crucible. *Iconoclash*, *Making Things Public*, and the recently opened *Reset Modernity!* each created a fictional space where experiments on what is critique, what is politics, what is modernity, could be carried out by the public in a way that could not possibly be done in a classroom, by reading catalogs, or in the harsh conditions of the “real world.” These shows were for me the best way to explore what embodied thought could mean, a stage uniquely suited for watching how conceptual characters could behave.

An exhibition is in many ways ideal multimedia, a form of “total art.” It is simultaneously an agora, a studio, a laboratory, a play, a choreography, in which all the layers of materiality composing the artificially built space—from lighting, walls, catalogue, location, to the sheer happenstance of encounters between works of arts and the visitors’ unpredictable moves—multiply the interactions, contrasts, dissonances, and contradictions between them. It makes for a great “critical” situation, provided you accept the meaning of critical “as having the potential to become disastrous” or “denoting a transition from one state to another” (both quotes from the OED!).

Take, for instance, one of the rooms of *Reset Modernity!* that is called “From land to disputed territories”—it is written on the wall. Imagine a visitor wondering about Pierre Huyghe’s “Nymphéas Transplant (14–18).” Although it is a meditation on Monet’s *Nymphéas*, there is no way she can take it as a direct imitation of an impressionist 2-D painting. A *transplant* it is indeed! So much so that it is now a 3-D aquarium of sorts, with the soil taken out of Giverny’s pond to which has been added plants and fish that are lit by such a complex mechanism that some visitors are faced with a totally opaque façade of glass, while others discover suddenly the phantom apparition of some ghosts of prehistoric times: axolotls! What do axolotls have to do with Monet? Nothing except that the fragile, carefully monitored pond has become an artificial ecosystem. Impressionism has been transplanted into another century and is viewed through another scopic regime.

What does this work of art say about ecology and impressionism? It does not *say* anything. But it is experienced by visitors who, on another wall, next to Huyghe’s piece, are faced with a documentation of what geochemists call “critical zones”: the equally fragile, equally threat-



Fig. 1. © Pierre Huyghe. *Nymphéas Transplant (14–18)*. 2014. Photo ZKM.

ened, equally opaque, and equally difficult-to-visualize regions, a few kilometers thin, where earthly life resides. While visitors ponder what this juxtaposition of art and science could mean, they cannot but feel impressed—or they may be oppressed—by the immense display of maps printed by *Territorial Agency* in the next room, which shows in agonizing detail the extensive footprint of oil extraction in Texas, Canada, the Middle East, Nigeria, and the Arctic. The *Museum of Oil*—such is the name of this module—is built in such a way that the panels are slanted by a few degrees, as if visitors could run the risk of being flattened by their looming shape!

Suppose that the visitor, who has been asked at the entrance to the show to leaf through the *Field Book*—a sort of easy-to-carry, well-designed catalog—now reads the injunction curators have introduced to “make sense” of the room title on the wall:

Strangely, the space of globalization is largely spaceless, or at least lacking a soil. Moving in it was like moving on a 2-D map. Things are different today: It is the revenge of the soil! Instead of looking at soil horizontally from above, what if we looked at it vertically from below? Instead of looking at the “blue planet” what about digging through critical zones, examining the thin planetary membrane that contains all forms of living beings? Obviously this new land, seen in 3-D, is much more difficult to map. Therefore we need detectors and sensors to become aware of its entangled loops.



Fig. 2. © A view of station 4 of Reset Modernity with a lateral view of Tacita Dean. *Quaternary*. 2014, Sophie Ristelhueber. *WB#6* 2005/16 and the Arctic Map devised by Territorial Agency for The Museum of Oil. Photo ZKM.

No question that this is written in a sort of abstract theory style. Does the text “explain” what should be experienced? In a way, yes. But how could it have any meaning without the impressions given by “Nymphéas Transplant,” the *Museum of Oil*, and the many other pieces around that I have not described? Theory talk is not the metalanguage that is supposed to convey the meaning of what the assembled artists are simply “showing” with their own “limited” language. Theory talk is a highly limited language that might help visitors realize that, if we have many representations of the Blue Planet viewed from outer space—in effect, a view from nowhere—we are completely lost when landing back on Earth. Or it might not help visitors at all; they can easily skip the paragraph, forget to turn the leaf of their *Field Book*, be attentive to an entirely different feature. It is for them to decide.

It is to describe this connecting role of the humanities that I have often used the word *infralanguage* to point out its subservient but useful role; I have more recently moved to the notion of *diplomacy*. In that sense, I could define “humanists” as those who are in charge of facilitating diplomatic encounters. A role that is slightly more eminent than that of *maître d’hôtel*, but much less important than those who are really parties at the negotiation. A job akin to that we would call “*chiefs of protocol*,” a chief, yes, but only of the protocol. That is, someone who makes sure that the assembly remains attentive to the delicate *etiquette* protecting participants from runaway violence.

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I am sorry not to have found anything more grandiose to say in defense of the humanities. But if you agree to define them as a form of diplomacy, I might conclude by showing that such a limited but indispensable role could clarify the dilemma of the humanities at the present time. If there is no metalanguage, then *no language* can claim to lord it over all the others, or exclude them from assembling to progressively compose a common world (the makeshift definition I give of politics). To claim otherwise would be a breach of etiquette and a sure way of hastening the dissolution of a putative assembly in charge of common matters of concern. (This is, by the way, why I try to push critical discourse aside: not to criticize critique but simply because it is often a poor chief of protocol. When it resonates in the room, everyone disbands!)

As most of the authors in this symposium have stressed, the humanities have a problem with the word “human.” But I think this is also their great advantage because they are placed just on the fault line where all the various and successive meanings of “human” and “humanity” are being thrown back into the crucible of the New Climatic Regime (a term I now prefer to that of Anthropocene).

If the humanities have never been especially anthropo- or humanocentric, it is because they always had to deal with conceptual characters, that is, with a bewildering number of *figurations*, only some of which have looked like realistic portraits—or rather clichés—of human subjects. The authors of the papers in this collection would agree that it would be as silly to define the humanities as the “defense” of the human, as it would be to pretend that a Ingres portrait is “more human” than a Picasso cubist figuration, or that James Joyce is less a psychologist than Madame de Lafayette. So, if there are disciplines that are not especially surprised to hear about completely different associations of humans and

nonhumans, it is those in the field of the humanities. If we are asked to reimagine humans as a geological force with trails of CO² in their wake, readers of Shakespeare are as well-prepared as anthropologists or geochemists. Overall, the humanities have been very good at recognizing humans in many other shapes and forms. When everybody speaks of another human *agency*, the humanists have all the right to say “we have been there already.”

And that’s the reason why the field of the humanities is so well-prepared to resist the reverse danger of a sudden naturalization of humans and of all the other nonhumans in whose destiny they have always played a part. As Donna Haraway famously said, “*If I have a dog, the dog has a human.*” For what might be the first time in (Western) history, the *reversibility* of conceptual characters allows them to escape naturalization—objects have many other forms of agency than those granted to them by idealist matter—as well as to free themselves from the narrow definition of a human as endowed with a psyche, a consciousness, a soul, and a small amount of morality distinct from objects of nature. Just as Rome is not in Rome, the humanities are not constricted by (provisional forms of) humanism.

I know of no better example of how ideal the present situation is for the humanities than the total metamorphosis undergone by what has been recognized as the question of the sublime. I will finish with this example.

As we learned at school, it was possible to experience such a feeling on three conditions: you had to be a very *small* human compared to the immensity of the forces of nature; compared to those mindless objective forces, you had to be immensely *big* in terms of the grandeur of your soul and the impeccability of your moral consciousness; and, even more important than these two features, you had to remain *firmly protected* from the consequences of cascades, glaciers, volcanoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, and other catastrophes so that they could be witnessed from a safe distance as an *outside spectacle*. As we all know, this is explained very well by Kant, especially the third feature: “But, *provided our own position is secure*, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul *above* the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to *measure ourselves* against the *seeming omnipotence* of nature” (emphasis mine). Well “our own position is no longer secure,” and we discover in our own “omnipotence” a quite discouraging lack of “resistance.” So, suddenly everything is again on the move.

If we now reconsider such a famous text, I should have no difficulty showing you the immense amount of work lying ahead for the field of

the humanities: first, we are no longer at a safe distance from any of the effects of the “forces of nature”; second, we are told by many scientific disciplines that we have become so big, so cumbersome, that we, as humans, are now of a size commensurable with volcanoes and, some say, with plate tectonics; as to the immense grandeur of our morality, alas, we seem so dejected, so puny, that we have not the slightest idea of how to respond to the new situation. The task of work for the humanities is even more immense given that we have no political idea of what constitutes the “we” endowed with the ability to respond to such a major transformation. Time indeed to “measure ourselves.” Exit the feeling of the sublime. What’s next? The successor of the sublime is under construction.

You see that this is the wrong time to lament the destiny of the humanities. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith uncharitably concludes her charitable commentary on my own attempts: “There is good reason to think the mission will fail!” On this score, she is in agreement with the five referees of the AIME project I submitted five years ago to the European Research Council, who concluded unanimously: “It cannot possibly succeed; it should be funded as a first priority.” Is this not a fairly realistic definition of the field of the humanities?!

I hope you will forgive me for this little foray into my relation with writing and the politics of the humanities and that you will convey my thanks to the authors in this symposium.

With all good wishes,
Bruno

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