

HUMANISM

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Tony Davies



ROUTLEDGE

| *the* NEW CRITICAL IDIOM |

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HUMANISM

Seemingly an appeal to a simple, shared humanity, humanism has proved over the last two hundred years one of the most contentious and divisive of concepts. It has provoked a succession of often bitter altercations and engages with some of the profoundest themes – philosophical, sexual, political – of modern life and thought.

Starting with the nineteenth-century educationalists and historians who coined and first defined the word, Tony Davies' study traces the emergence of the figure of 'Man' in the writings of the humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the freethinkers and *philosophes* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He also explores the issues at stake in the later encounters between humanism and a succession of intransigent antihumanisms.

Humanism is an essential guide to one of the key concepts in cultural and literary thought.

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HUMANISM

Tony Davies



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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the large sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

In memoriam E.I.D. (1912-92) and R.W.D. (1912-93)

INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF HUMANISM

What is humanism?

Well, that all depends, as they used to say on the *Brains Trust*, on what you mean. The first problem, as always, is the problem of definition. So let's start with the dictionary – or rather, with the daughter of a famous dictionary-maker.

'There's glory for you!'

'I don't know what you mean by "glory",' Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant, "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'

'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument",' Alice objected.

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'

(Carroll 1965: 268–9)

The Alice for whom Charles Lutwidge Dodgson invented her namesake's fantastic adventures through the looking-glass was Alice Liddell, the seven-year-old daughter of Henry George Liddell, ex-Head Master of Westminster School, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and compiler, with his colleague Robert Scott, of a monumentally authoritative *Greek-English Lexicon* (1843) whose 1800 pages encompassed the full variety – historical, etymological, geographical, grammatical, morphological – of ancient Greek, illustrated by examples drawn from virtually every extant author from the tragedian Achaeus Eritrieus to the historian Zosimus.

Known to generations of scholars and students simply as 'Liddell and Scott', the *Lexicon* borrowed its descriptive methodology and much of its material from the philological researches of Franz Passow, Professor of Greek at the University of Breslau in the 1850s, and Georg Curtius, his contemporary at Prague and Leipzig; for while the language and literature of the ancient Greeks continued to be studied in British schools and universities as it had been since the sixteenth century, the truly pioneering work on Greek and its sister Indo-European languages was being done, in the nineteenth century, in Germany. The motivation behind the great resurgence of German philological and archaeological scholarship was a reformed educational system inspired by the romantic hellenism of Winckelmann and Goethe;¹ and the word the reformers invented to describe their educational ideals, with a backward glance to the classical *studia humanitatis* or 'study of humanity' promoted by the *umanisti* or educators of an earlier 'renaissance', was *Humanismus*: humanism.

Humanism is a word with a very complex history and an unusually wide range of possible meanings and contexts; and for anyone attempting to offer an account of those meanings, the attraction of Humpty Dumpty's approach to the problems of definition is obvious. Life would certainly be much easier, and this book a good deal more straightforward, if I could simply set out my definition

of humanism on the first page, and then proceed to demonstrate, with carefully selected examples and a contemptuous disregard for any prosaic objections, that it means just what I choose it to mean.

No such luck, alas. The seven distinct sub-definitions of humanism rather conservatively offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in truth represent only a fraction of the senses and contexts in which the word has been used, and a drastic simplification of those. It is one of those words, like 'realism' or 'socialism', whose range of possible uses runs from the pedantically exact to the cosmically vague. Like them, too, it carries, even in the most neutrally descriptive contexts, powerful connotations, positive or negative, of ideological allegiance, its very imprecision making it all the more serviceable as a shibboleth of approval or deprecation. To some modern humanists, the contributors to Julian Huxley's *The Humanist Frame* (1961), for example, it stands self-evidently for the secular and rational decencies of contemporary civilisation (i.e. of people like themselves); while at the other extreme, I have known two normally quite civilised and peaceable academics almost come to blows after one accused the other's latest book of 'residual humanism', a description which was taken, rightly, as an insult of the most contumelious kind. On this subject at least, one person's 'glory' really can mean another's 'nice knock-down argument'.

Although Humpty Dumpty himself, unlike some of his colleagues in the Alice stories, is not strictly speaking an allegorical figure, he is certainly more than a piece of harmless drollery borrowed from a well-known children's rhyme. The mathematician Dodgson, as a young Fellow of Liddell's Christ Church in the 1850s and 60s, was at the epicentre of the theological ructions caused by the Catholic-inspired Oxford Movement and the row precipitated by the publication of the doctrinally unorthodox *Essays and Reviews* (1860). Both of these, in their contrasting ways, were reactions to another kind of

'humanism', the secular rationalism and scientific positivism that seemed to many to be undermining the foundations of Anglican belief. Humpty has been described as 'Verbal Inspiration sitting on a wall of scripture' (Taylor 1952: 123), High Church orthodoxy entrenched in an authoritarian biblical theodicy ('there's glory for you'), and his fall has been associated with the dismay occasioned in the Anglican faithful, among whom the Reverend Dodgson would have numbered himself, when two of the contributors to the knockdown arguments of *Essays and Reviews*, who had been arraigned for heresy before an ecclesiastical court, were acquitted on appeal by the 'King's men' of the Privy Council.²

But Humpty is also a philological despot, a linguistic no less than a theological authority; and humanism, as we shall see, is inseparable from the question of language. 'Man', in the old definition, is the 'talking animal'. The fifteenth-century Florentine *umanisti* from whom the word ultimately derives were above all language teachers, rhetoricians, translators, and the tools they forged for their trade were the lexicon and the glossary. According to Johnson's *Dictionary*, a humanist is 'a grammarian; a philologer', a definition that suggests how low that noble occupation had fallen by the later eighteenth century.³ Even Humpty, in whose withering presence words surrender their autonomy and meekly submit to the meanings he prescribes for them, justifies his linguistic terrorism with a kind of etymological authority. For Alice is wrong: 'glory' really can mean 'a nice knock-down argument'. One of the oldest meanings of the word is 'exulting over the defeat of an enemy', as the contributors to *Essays and Reviews* exulted, or gloried, in the humiliating 'knock-down' of their clerical persecutors. In short, he is, like Alice's father, a lexicographer.

When Dodgson wrote, 'humanism' was a word of recent coinage; but already the complex of ideas to which it referred was associated with (another nineteenth-century word) the 'Renaissance', a dauntingly complicated constellation of political,

cultural and intellectual developments in fifteenth-century Europe whose very existence is dismissed by some twentieth-century historians as a fiction, even while others continue to identify it as the birthplace of the modern world.⁴ The resulting accumulation and contest of meanings is densely impacted and at times explosively controversial. On one side, humanism is saluted as the philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity, standing alone and often outnumbered against the battalions of ignorance, tyranny and superstition. For Matthew Arnold, whose work has exerted incalculable influence in shaping educational thinking in the English-speaking world, it is synonymous with the 'culture' to which we must look as the only bulwark against the materialistic 'anarchy' of contemporary society.⁵ On the other, it has been denounced as an ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture, the marginalisation and oppression of the multitudes of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak, even, through an inexorable 'dialectic of enlightenment', for the nightmare of fascism and the atrocity of total war.⁶ In one sense or other it has helped to articulate all the major themes of the continuously unfolding revolution of modernity, structuring key concepts and debates in politics, science, aesthetics, philosophy, religion and education; and in spite of the anachronistic crankiness of some contemporary 'humanist' movements, and the damage inflicted by a variety of philosophical antihumanisms (some of which will be explored in later chapters), the question of humanism remains ideologically and conceptually central to modern – even to 'postmodern' – concerns.

This is the tangle that the following pages will attempt to unravel: not in the hope of rescuing a single stable 'meaning', or even a range of sharply-focussed definitions; still less of suggesting, amid all the vertiginously proliferating and often contradictory senses assigned to the word, that one or another is in some way original or primary. They will set out rather to explore the uses to which the concept has been put in different times and situations, the questions

it has tried to answer, and to suggest what is ‘at stake’, historically and ideologically, in the often bitter contentions in which it has taken on such an array of competing significations and values. For the meanings of a powerful and complex word are never a matter for lexicography alone. They are tied inescapably to the linguistic and cultural authority, real, absent or desired, of those who use it. The important question, over and above what the word *means* in a particular context, is why and how that meaning *matters*, and for whom. On this at least, Humpty Dumpty’s advice cannot be improved on by the cultural historian. When Alice wonders, innocently, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things’, the philosophical egg goes straight to the heart of the matter: “‘The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.””

The sequence of the chapters that follow – the first two dealing with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the third and fourth with the period from the fifteenth to the later eighteenth century, while the Conclusion goes back still further, to the early etymology of the word ‘human’ and its uses in antiquity – must look eccentric; and it might seem that a reader hoping for a straightforward chronological narrative would do better to start at the end, then read Chapters 3 and 4, before turning back finally to the first two. But the order of the four numbered chapters, ending where they began in the tumultuous half century that separates Immanuel Kant’s ‘Enlightenment’ essay from the educational reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the secession of the North American colonies from the fall of Napoleon, does have its own peculiar logic, which I hope will be apparent to the reader who is patient enough to let it unfold in its own way – by which time the reason for leaving the beginning until the end may also have become a bit clearer.

1

THE INVENTION OF HUMANITY

To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself.

(Karl Marx)

The Parthenon, the ancient temple of the warrior-goddess Athena that dominates the limestone crag of the Acropolis in Athens, is certainly one of the most illustrated buildings in the world. But among the innumerable images of that famous ruin there is one which haunts the memory. In the background stands the eastern facade of the great temple, its eight Doric columns and broken pediment catching the early sun, with the Athenian suburbs and the Aegalean hills faintly visible in the haze to the west. In the foreground, on a circular floor that once supported a temple consecrated to the Roman emperor Augustus, a dozen men in uniform are standing around a makeshift flagpole, up which a large flag, swelling gently in the morning breeze, is being raised. Over the centuries many soldiers – Persians, Spartans, Macedonians, Romans, Goths, Byzantines, Franks, Catalans, Venetians, Ottomans, Bavarians – have stood on that spot. But

this is different. The date is 27 April 1941; the soldiers wear the uniform of the sixth armoured division of the German *Wehrmacht*; and the flag that billows above the occupied city bears the insignia of Adolf Hitler's thousand-year Reich, the iron cross and the swastika.¹

For most people to whom it means anything at all, the photograph probably records one of the elemental confrontations of the modern period: on the one hand, the Parthenon, supreme symbol of the ancient world, the 'cradle of civilization', the birthplace of democracy (the very word is Athenian) and rationality, the unsurpassable paradigm of human beauty and wisdom; on the other, the despotic savagery and irrationality of the Third Reich, a new barbarism of blood and iron. The twentieth century, for all its horrors, can still find none to equal those that came out of Germany between 1933 and 1945; and the cool Pentelic marble whose stupendous symmetries have seen and survived so many conquerors here submits to the latest and most terrible of them all. It is as if Matthew Arnold's worst nightmare, the final overthrow of culture, with its hellenic 'sweetness and light', by the 'ignorant armies' of anarchy and darkness, has taken concrete form on that spring morning in 1941.

But although photographs never lie, that may be only because they never say anything at all. Interpretation is everything; and a little digging can yield another reading. The part-time secretary of the small Nazi Party organisation in Athens was the forty-one-year-old Walter Wrede, who worked as a classical archaeologist at the German Archaeological School in the city. For Wrede, 27 April was a big day, rich compensation for the months of anti-German abuse that had driven him to take up almost permanent refuge in the School. Wrede it was who had the honour of meeting the advance party of the occupying sixth division when they drove into the city that morning and conducting them in person to the Acropolis. Later he posed for

photographs with Field-Marshal Brauchitsch, General von Stumme and other staff officers, ardent Nazis every one of them, and, like most middle-class Germans, enthusiastic philhellenes. All Germans, wrote General Lanz, 'admire the great past and lofty culture of Hellas' (Mazower 1993: 158). Hitler himself, in a letter to his ally Benito Mussolini, recorded with pride this epochal encounter between a resurgent Germany and the 'symbol of modern culture' (Mazower 1993: 8). Had not the great Richard Wagner, Teutonic nationalist and anti-Semite, been acclaimed by his disciple Friedrich Nietzsche as the contemporary incarnation of the hellenic spirit? Was not the very notion of the 'Aryan' type, so central to the National Socialist doctrine of racial purity, borrowed from the work of the German philologists and hellenists of the previous century?² Had not the Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger only the other day hailed Greek civilisation as 'the beginning of our spiritual-historical being', a destiny which 'awaits us, as a distant command bidding us catch up with its greatness' (Guignan 1993: 32)? And as for the *Führer* himself, had he not declared that, amidst all the trash and filth produced by degenerate races through the ages, the only authentic artistic heritage was the Greco-German?³ From one point of view, at least, that sunny morning in 1941 witnessed not a tragic confrontation between hellenic culture and barbaric anarchy, but the historic affirmation of an ancient continuity, in which the invading Germans appear not as the destroyers of Greek civilisation but as its liberators, the heirs and custodians of its sacred flame.

So many stories, Brecht said, so many questions. But what has all this to do with *humanism*?

Firstly, as we have already seen, the word itself is of German coinage; and secondly, its credentials are Greek. *Humanismus* was a term devised, probably by the educationalist Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, in the early nineteenth century to describe a high-school and university curriculum based on what have been known since the Middle Ages as the 'humanities': the study of ancient Greek

and Latin, and of the literature, history and culture of the peoples who spoke them. The word was soon taken up by cultural historians like Georg Voigt and Jacob Burckhardt to describe the humanistic ‘new learning’, a ‘Renaissance’ or rebirth of Greco-Roman civilisation and its associated values promoted by the *umanisti* – professional teachers and scholars – of fifteenth-century Italy. And since the notion of the Renaissance, and with it a whole way of thinking about the relations between past and present, antiquity and modernity, continues in its turn to exert an enduring influence, these early nineteenth-century German debates about education and culture, history and politics, will repay a closer look.

ROMANTIC HUMANISM

The neo-humanistic (*neuhumanistische*) syllabus pioneered by educational reformers like Niethammer, along with better-known contemporaries like the philosopher and teacher G.W.F. Hegel, and Wilhelm von Humboldt, creator of the modern *Gymnasium* (high school) system and founder of the University of Berlin, was an attempt to civilise the crudely practical and chauvinistic (the poet Heinrich Heine called it *philister* – ‘philistine’) ethos of the North German ruling and middle classes. Like the Florentine *umanisti* from whom they borrowed their watchword, the German reformers of the early nineteenth century grounded their curriculum in ‘classics’ – Latin and, especially, Greek language, literature and culture, refracted through the romantic hellenism of Winckelmann, Goethe and Hölderlin. ‘Our study of Greek history’, wrote Humboldt,

is a matter quite different from our other studies . . . Knowledge of the Greeks is not merely pleasant, useful or necessary to us – no, in the Greeks alone we find the ideal of what we should like to be and produce.

(Bernal 1987: 287)

And in the same spirit, the curriculum of Hegel's *Egidium Gymnasium* in Nuremberg gave due weight to mathematics, history and physical education; but half of its twenty-seven hours of weekly instruction were devoted to the study of Greek and Latin.

The hellenism of these neo-humanist educators was as far from the reactionary pedantry of Oxford 'classics' as it was from the merely ornamental neoclassicism of so much post-Renaissance English poetry – what Samuel Johnson dismissed contemptuously as a 'train of mythological imagery such as a college easily supplies'.⁴ The hellenic ideal belonged, for Hegel and Humboldt as for Goethe and Schiller, not to the remote past and the post-mortem formalities of an ancient language, but to the future. For them, the modern Germany they were engaged in building, cultured, orderly and modern, would be the fruition of what the ancient Greeks had dreamed. 'The name of Greece', Hegel wrote, 'strikes home to the hearts of men of education in Europe, and more particularly is this so with us Germans' (Bernal 1987: 295). And his most famous and most insubordinate disciple inherited his hellenism, if not his enthusiasm for the authoritarian ethos of the Prussian state. 'Man's self-esteem', wrote the young Karl Marx in 1843,

his sense of freedom, must be awakened in the breast of [the German] people. This sense vanished from the world with the Greeks, and with Christianity it took up residence in the blue mists of heaven, but only with its aid can society ever again become a community of men that can fulfil their highest needs, a democratic state.

(Marx 1975: 201)

Marx himself was soon to turn sharply against the Hegelian idealism of supposing that people's lives can be transformed simply by reawakening the sense of freedom in their heads and hearts. Already by 1844 he was formulating a radical humanism ('to be radical is

to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself') based not on the speculative abstraction of Hegelian logic but on the dynamic identity of man and nature, revealed in 'the inexhaustible, vital, sensuous, concrete activity' of human labour:

Communism is the positive supersession of private property as human self estrangement, and hence the true appropriation of the human essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a social, i.e. human, being . . . This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully-developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man, the true resolution of the conflict between existence and being, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be the solution.

(Marx 1975: 348)

Later still, after the dashed revolutionary hopes of 1848–9, this vein of utopian enthusiasm will be submitted in its turn to the astringent discipline of historical actuality. But the fascination with ancient Greece, the sense that it represents a still-unfulfilled ideal, persists. In an early draft of the work that will become *Das Kapital*, Marx has been arguing that Greek art can only be understood in the context of the social relations and conditions that produced it – a 'Marxist' commonplace that is hardly likely to arouse much argument even today. 'But the difficulty', he continues,

lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model.

(Marx 1973a: 111)

The Greeks, he suggests, were ‘the historic childhood of humanity’; and although ‘a man cannot become a child again’, he can still ‘find joy in the child’s naïveté’, and even ‘strive to reproduce its truth at a higher stage’.

The veteran theorist of class struggle understands perfectly well, of course, that Athenian democracy was built with bricks of slavery, and cemented with a xenophobic contempt for non-Greek-speaking ‘barbarians’ as virulent as the jingoism of any Tory imperialist; but for a moment he has forgotten. The passage, written in London in 1857, the year of the Indian Mutiny and the British seizure of Canton, suggests how deeply even the most radical thought of the period was saturated by the hellenocentric ideals of Goethean romanticism and Humboldtian *Humanismus*.

HUMANISM IN ENGLAND

1857, the year in which Marx wrote the unpublished *Grundrisse*, is also, as it happens, the year of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*. The humanist ethos had already found its way into British intellectual culture through the advocacy of Germanophiles like Samuel Coleridge, his disciple Connop Thirlwall (whose massive *History of Greece* was an early monument to the influence in England of German classical scholarship), and Thomas Arnold. Arnold above all, through his innovative regime as headmaster of Rugby School, established the now-familiar public school curriculum, with its twin pillars of classics and competitive games (the second no less ‘hellenic’ in inspiration than the first), that continues to dominate the education of the English ruling class to the present day. And the Doctor’s most famous and influential pupil, we may guess, is not his son Matthew, enthusiastic Goethean and energetic propagandist for a culture of hellenic ‘sweetness and light’ to redeem the philistinism of the English bourgeoisie and the gathering anarchy of capitalist class conflict, but his fictional contemporary Tom Brown, whose Rugby schooldays, as described

in Thomas Hughes' idyllically nostalgic narrative, did more than anything else in the period to establish Arnold's peculiarly English hybrid of German *Bildung* and British sportiness in the popular imagination. In one particularly poignant scene, Tom and his friend Arthur, waiting their turn to bat against a visiting MCC eleven, are discussing with a young master the importance of grasping the finer points of Greek syntax. Out on the pitch a skilful stroke is played, to applause.

'How well they are bowling, though,' said Arthur, 'they don't mean to be beat, I can see.'

'There now,' struck in the master, 'you see that's just what I have been preaching this half-hour. The delicate play is the true thing. I don't understand cricket, so I don't enjoy those fine draws which you tell me are the best play, though when you or Raggles hit a hard ball away for six I am as delighted as anyone. Don't you see the analogy?'

'Yes, sir,' answered Tom, looking up, roguishly, 'I see; only the question remains whether I should have got most good by understanding Greek particles or cricket thoroughly. I'm such a thick, I never should have had time for both.'

'I see you are an incorrigible,' said the master, with a chuckle, 'but I refute you by an example. Arthur there has taken in Greek and cricket too.'⁵

'We are all Greeks': Shelley's words might serve as a motto for generations of young middle-class Englishmen (for the hellenic ideal, like the public schools themselves, is exclusively male territory). From the champions of Greek independence in the 1820s like Shelley's friend Byron, to the officers who sent their troops into combat in the Dardanelles campaign with the *Iliad* ringing in their ears, they modelled their ideas of conduct on an improbable but potent compound of Homer and the laws of cricket, the Trojan War and the Eton-Harrow game. Few if any

would have called themselves ‘humanists’, a word that in England carried uncomfortable connotations of Unitarianism⁶ or even downright atheism, and was certainly incompatible with the profession of Christian and gentleman (Hughes himself was a Christian Socialist). But all were the legitimate offspring of *Humanismus* nonetheless – translated into an English cultural register, to be sure, but still bearing the unmistakable features of its Prussian and romantic lineage.

RENAISSANCE MAN: A NINETEENTH-CENTURY CREATION

Jacob Burckhardt, a German-speaking Swiss and himself a devoted child of the same tradition, defined humanism as ‘the discovery of the world and of man’; but this was a humanism whose roots lay not in the ancient Greece of Winckelmann and Humboldt but in the city-states of fifteenth-century Italy. His central historical question, the same question posed by other social thinkers like Karl Marx and Max Weber, was about the conditions that made possible, or inevitable, the bourgeois revolution of modernity. Why, they asked, did the characteristic features of modern liberal capitalism – dynamic, innovative, expansive – develop in Europe and North America rather than in the ancient societies, no less elaborate in culture or technology, of Asia and the Orient? Marx found his explanation in the expansion of merchant capital and the emergence of a class of ambitious burghers in late-medieval towns. Weber located his in the frugal domestic economy and Calvinist independence of the Protestant middle classes in post-reformation Europe.⁷ For Burckhardt the explanation lay in a particular interplay between the political and military necessities of independent Italian cities and the secular individualism, nurtured by a humanist interest in antiquity but essentially quite new, of their middle-class citizens and rulers.

Germany in Burckhardt’s time was developing painfully from an agglomeration of small principalities towards a unified national

state; and the title he gave to the first part of the work, 'The State as a Work of Art', speaks to contemporary preoccupations with statehood and national unity. Emergent Germany finds her reflection and inspiration here in the writings of Renaissance humanist historians, political theorists and jurists – Guiccardini, Machiavelli, Grotius, Bodin – and in the embattled but fiercely independent states like Florence and Geneva in and about which they wrote. Behind all these, still, stands the unsurpassable example of Periclean Athens, supreme paradigm of 'the state determined by culture', the city of which Burckhardt remarked wistfully that, alone in world history, she 'has no tedious pages' (Burckhardt 1964: 217–18). But the Greek ideal of humane civilisation, glimpsed briefly in the charmed interim between the Persian and the Peloponnesian wars, and in the writings of the Athenian poets and philosophers, was no more than the seed from which the great oak of German culture would rise.

Above all, Burckhardt's Renaissance was the epoch of the *individual*. The second part of his great work is titled 'The Development of the Individual'; and the concept, the central one in his understanding of the period, denotes not just those heroic or demonic *uomini universali* – Sforzas, Borgias and Medicis – who haunt the popular histories of the period, but the development of a universal capacity to think of yourself, in a fundamental way, as an individual: not as Florentine or Marseillais or a sailor or Roman Catholic or somebody's daughter and grand-daughter, important though all those affiliations might be, but as a free-standing self-determining person with an identity and a name that is not simply a marker of family, birthplace or occupation but is 'proper' – belonging to you alone.

Burckhardt does not comment, though it would not contradict his argument, on the modernity of many of the key terms in that last sentence – *individual*, *identity*, *proper* – nor on the striking semantic reversals that from the sixteenth century rendered words like *individual* (originally 'inseparable') and *identity*

(‘sameness’) over to meanings almost exactly the opposite of their traditional ones. His interest is in the political significance of Renaissance individualism, portending the end of medieval society, with its supposedly inert aggregations of nameless, unselfconscious subjects, and the onset of the modern nation state, populated and animated by individual citizens.

Burckhardt is able, of course, to support his reading of the Renaissance from the writings of the period, which certainly exhibit a fascination with heroic individuality: Machiavelli’s ruthlessly success-oriented *Prince*, Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters*, the outrageous egoists and megalomaniacs of Marlowe’s tragedies. But it is equally easy to see that ‘individualism’ itself is a modern concern, a product of the period that produced Samuel Smiles’ *Self Help* and the ethos of manly independence forged by the public school. The desire to find in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the headwaters of an essentially nineteenth-century individuality manifests itself even more dramatically in a historical extravaganza called *The Renaissance* by the French diplomat and royalist Arthur, Comte de Gobineau; but whereas Burckhardt’s Renaissance exhibits a tumultuous dialectic between individual energies, political or artistic, and the necessary synergy of state and citizenry, Gobineau’s account of the period, which takes the form of a series of dialogues between famous Italians like Michelangelo, Savonarola and Cesare Borgia, finds in it not civic solidarity and the first stirrings of modern statecraft but the uncompromising selfhood and will to power of individual ‘genius’, the expression of an innate superiority:

the great law of the world . . . is to live, to enlarge and develop our most active and sublime qualities, in such a way that from any sphere we can always strive to reach one that is wider, more airy, more elevated . . . Leave weakness and scruples to the petty minds and the rabble of underlings.

(Gobineau 1970: 199–200)

This proto-Nietzschean⁸ inclination leads to some painful contortions, as does his infatuation with the Teutonic 'race' and 'blood' and his contempt for the degenerate Mediterranean peoples, which require him, absurdly, to conscript Michelangelo, the Borgias and other Renaissance supermen as honorary Germans. According to Gobineau, the Renaissance, that 'magnificent flowering of artistic and literary culture' in which we witness 'the flower of the human spirit most vividly in bloom', is entirely the result of the energising enrichment of Roman with Teutonic blood; an efflorescence all too tragically brief, as Italy falls back into its habitual racial torpor: 'its glory scarcely lasted a hundred years and, when it had ended, the general agony began again' (Gobineau 1970: 149).

Such vapid invocations to 'the flower of the human spirit' remind us that this, too, is a variety of humanism, of a kind that does not encourage complacency. From the Germanophile Gobineau, who fantasised his own quite spurious Teutonic ancestry and is best known for his *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1853), the trail leads, via friendship with the admiring Richard Wagner and the enthusiastic approval of Nietzsche's fanatical sister Elizabeth, more or less directly to those *Wehrmacht* officers and Nazi functionaries on the Acropolis in 1941. He too, naturally, was a philhellene, and the *Essay*, in which the ancient Greeks are contrasted with the degenerate Romans as bearers of the pure Aryan blood-line, became a standard school-text in Hitler's Germany.

For all their differences – and I do not mean for a moment to suggest any sympathy of aims or temperament between the retiring, scholarly Burckhardt and the vain, self-aggrandising Gobineau – the important thing for both writers is the historical role of Renaissance humanism in instituting a new and distinctively modern notion of human individuality, a notion projected back onto the writings of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century *umanisti*, but demonstrably shaped by and inseparable from nineteenth-century conditions and concerns. The political energies and instabilities

unleashed by the American and French revolutions of the previous century; the explosive acceleration of capitalist production, with its spectral antagonist, the industrial working class; the expansion of the great European nation states, in the competitive scramble for economic and political hegemony, into imperial powers with a vast extramural proletariat of subjugated peoples; the dilapidation of Christianity as a resource of moral authority and national ideology: all these familiar features of nineteenth-century experience necessitated an idea that could at once rationalise an explosive and unpredictable modernity (as the triumphant achievement of heroic human endeavour), and justify or palliate its all-too-visible brutalities and inequalities.

Clearly a concept capable of bearing such a weight of explanatory responsibility will be fraught with contradictory meanings and implications. For Gobineau, humanism dictates the racial superiority of the Teuton and the unaccountable mastery of individual genius. For the young Marx it underwrites the necessity of revolution and the dream of a humanity emancipated from inequality and exploitation. Matthew Arnold invokes an eirenic humanistic 'culture' to arbitrate and unify the divisive anarchy of politics and class; while atheists like T.H. Huxley, champion of godless Darwinism, and Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society, summon the spirit of humanism to cast out the last tenacious delusions of Christian superstition.⁹

Different and clearly incompatible versions of the 'human' are circulating here, within the orbit of a single concept. For Arnold, the 'central, truly human point of view', though evidently modern and European, stands for something essential, above and beyond the accidents of historical or national difference, a quality sometimes eclipsed by ignorance or self-interest, but visible in Homer and Sophocles no less than in Shakespeare or Goethe twenty or more centuries later; whereas for Marx the 'human' is not a single

unchanging entity at all but a sign of change, the site of a continuous transformation. What they share – what makes them all ‘humanists’ – is their conviction of the centrality of the ‘human’ itself.

THE BIRTH OF MODERNITY

The reference to a ‘central, truly human point of view’ comes from Arnold’s discussion of Chaucer in an essay called ‘The Study of Poetry’ in the 1888 *Essays in Criticism*, and it serves as a useful starting-point for an exploration of the English appropriation of Burckhardtian *Humanismus*. Arnold has been discussing the peculiar limitations of medieval romance poetry, the *Song of Roland*, the *Romance of the Rose*, the Arthurian tales and troubadour lyrics, with their narrow range of subject-matter and attitude, their uncritical deference to social and religious orthodoxy. Then, in the fourteenth century,

there comes an Englishman nourished on this poetry . . . If we ask ourselves wherein consists the immense superiority of Chaucer’s poetry over the romance poetry – why it is that in passing from this to Chaucer we suddenly feel ourselves to be in another world – we shall find that his superiority is both in the substance of his poetry and in the style of his poetry. His superiority in substance is given by his large, free, simple, clear yet kindly view of human life, – so unlike the total want, in the romance-poets, of all intelligent command of it. Chaucer has not their helplessness; he has gained the power to survey the world from a central, a truly human point of view.

(Arnold 1888: 27–8)

This description of Chaucer’s poetry seems uncontentious enough, perhaps even a bit banal. Who would want to deny that the *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, with their stories of men and women meeting, marrying, quarrelling, falling in and out of

love, are written from a 'human point of view'? But why the insistence that that point of view is 'central'? And what is implied by the special emphasis suggested by 'truly human'? What other points of view – eccentric, marginal, inauthentic – are implied in its coupling of the true, the central and the human?

The key stress, clearly, falls on the *human*; a word Arnold uses in a way that carries a number of powerful implications. One is historical. Chaucer, for Arnold, is the first modern, the first English writer to see the world not, like his medieval forebears and contemporaries (in this case the writers of medieval French romances), *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the cosmic vantage of a transcendent wisdom and authority embodied in the doctrines and traditions of the Church, still less from the parochial viewpoint of a particular social group (the aristocracy) or professional élite (monks or troubadours), but through the everyday experience of ordinary human beings, of all classes and both sexes. In his writing, the passage suggests, we encounter for the first time the authentic ('truly human') voice of secular individuality: not some solemn dance of allegorical Everyman and Everywoman acting out a bloodless theological paradigm, but what Arnold's contemporary Thomas Hardy called 'real enactments of the intensest kind': people with recognisable names and real occupations meeting and parting, fighting and loving in places whose names you can actually find on a map.

The second implication is ethical. Chaucer, we are invited to conclude, is not only an ordinary human being like ourselves, but also a great poet. All those idiomatic characters with their quirky individuality are gathered into the generously encompassing ('central') humanity of the poet himself, who views them not as the playthings of an inscrutable deity but as fellow creatures, citizens like himself, with the common human frailties and aspirations. Thus Chaucer's humanity is both general and special, common and rare. Each of us lives our human-ness as a uniquely individual experience; but that experience, we are asked

to feel, is part of a larger, all-embracing humanity, a 'human condition', to which the great poets of the European tradition, Homer and Dante and Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton and Goethe, can give us the key. In this sense, evidently, Arnold's 'central . . . truly human point of view' is not really – or not only – a historical matter at all, but an appeal to the essentially, universally human.

What, if anything, all this has to do with what the actual Geoffrey Chaucer actually wrote is not, for our purposes, either here nor there. What is clear is that Arnold's Chaucer is himself a character in what the French philosopher of the 'postmodern', Jean-François Lyotard, calls a 'metanarrative',¹⁰ a powerful historical and ideological *myth*; and that myth is most certainly both here and there: *there* in the late nineteenth century, where this particularly powerful and complex notion of the 'human' – a quality at once local and universal, historical and timeless – first finds its full articulation, and *here* too, in the still later twentieth, where, whether or not we care about or have even heard of Geoffrey Chaucer or Matthew Arnold, it continues to shape not just the identity and subjectivity but the practical existence of a large proportion of the people, and the peoples, of the world. It is the myth of the *modern*; the *Renaissance* is its infancy; and its guiding ethos, its watchword, is *humanism*.

The essence of humanism consisted in a new and vital perception of the dignity of man as a rational being apart from theological determinations, and in the further perception that classic literature alone displayed human nature in the plenitude of intellectual and moral freedom. It was partly a reaction against ecclesiastical despotism, partly an attempt to find the point of unity for all that had been thought and done by man, within the mind restored to consciousness of its own sovereign faculty.

(Symonds 1898: 52)

The second volume of J.A. Symonds' *The Renaissance in Italy*, subtitled *The Revival of Learning* and first published in 1877, three years before Arnold's 'The Study of Poetry', did more than any other book to establish for English readers the Burckhardtian historiography of the Renaissance, and the centrality to it of humanism. For Symonds, as for Arnold, the recovery by the scholars, poets and painters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries not just of the writings but with them the spirit of classical antiquity is an achievement not of antiquarianism but, in the highest degree, of heroic modernity, nothing less than the foundation of a new humanity. Symonds called Chaucer's older contemporary, the Italian scholar-poet Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), 'the Columbus of a new spiritual hemisphere, the discoverer of modern culture'; and of the students of the Byzantine humanist Manolis (Emanuel) Chrysoloras he wrote that they

felt that the Greek texts, whereof he alone supplied the key, contained those elements of spiritual freedom and intellectual culture without which the civilisation of the modern world would be impossible . . . The study of Greek implied the birth of criticism, comparison, research. Systems based on ignorance and superstition were destined to give way before it. The study of Greek opened philosophical horizons far beyond the dreamworld of the churchmen and the monks; it stimulated the germs of science, suggested new astronomical hypotheses, and indirectly led to the discovery of America . . . we are justified in regarding the point of contact between the Greek teacher Chrysoloras and his Florentine pupils as one of the most momentous crises in the history of civilisation.

(Symonds 1898: 81–2)

Momentous indeed, if from that Tuscan schoolroom flowed not only the colonisation of the Americas (named after the sixteenth-century Florentine adventurer Amerigo Vespucci) but the imperial destinies of nineteenth-century Germany, France and above all Britain. Symonds' formulation of these connections, with their

powerful legitimization of the imperialist enterprise, is admirably uncomplicated:

Such is the Lampadephoria, or torch-race, of the nations. Greece stretches forth her hand to Italy; Italy consigns the fire to Northern Europe; the people of the North pass on the flame to America, to India, and the Australasian isles.

(Symonds 1898: 399)

Symonds and Arnold, then, give popular currency in England to ideas, including the idea of humanism itself, first articulated by German-speaking historians and philosophers a generation earlier: ideas developed within a distinctively German tradition and at a particularly critical moment in the historical and cultural formation of modern Germany. But can a word capable of sustaining so many and so diverse a variety of uses be said to mean anything at all? Is it any more than a blank screen onto which anyone can project their flickering fantasies of power or happiness? It may be, of course, that it is precisely this protean adaptability and serviceable vagueness that gives the word its rhetorical power and range. For in these nineteenth-century discourses, the figure of the human, though deployed in contexts that might suggest that it is geographically and historically specific (European and modern), in reality signifies something that is everywhere and always the same. Burckhardt, we have seen, credited the Italian humanists with the 'discovery of the world and man', a phrase that conceives of 'man' as a continent, like the undiscovered Indies or the New World, awaiting its Vasco da Gama or Columbus; while Symonds praised Petrarch and his successors for the realisation that 'classic literature alone displayed human nature in the plenitude of intellectual and moral freedom'. We might call this the myth of essential and universal Man: essential, because humanity – human-ness – is the inseparable and central essence, the defining quality, of human beings; universal, because that essential humanity is shared by all human beings, of whatever time or place.

To the extent that such formulations of the ‘human’ would have appeared strange, perhaps unintelligible, almost certainly blasphemously presumptuous to those earlier humanists who are credited with its ‘discovery’, ‘Renaissance humanism’, expressive of an essential humanity unconditioned by time, place or circumstance, is a nineteenth-century anachronism. But it is an anachronism that is still deeply engrained in contemporary self-consciousness and everyday common sense, to the extent that it requires a conscious effort, every time someone appeals to ‘human nature’ or ‘the human condition’, to recall how recent such notions are, and how specific to a particular history and point of view, and how very odd it would seem, in cultures historically or ethnologically unlike our own, to separate out and privilege ‘Man’ in this way.

THE RIGHTS OF MAN

Where, then, if not from the scholarly humanists of fifteenth-century Italy, does this abstract humanism, with its universalist and essentialist conception of Man, come from? In its origins, it is a political rather than a philosophical notion, deriving from the revolutionary discourse of rights. When Rousseau announces in *The Social Contract* (1762) that *L’homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers* (‘Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains’), the concept already enfolds a distinction between an abstract ‘Man’ (defined by an essential freedom) and actual ‘men’ caught in the toils of historical servitude. The *Rights of Man* announced by Thomas Paine in his famous polemic of that name in 1792 belong not to this or that group of ‘men’ but to ‘Man’ in general. Indeed, we might say that it is precisely in the move from the ‘empirical plurality’ of an earlier republicanism (from, say, the ‘all men naturally were born free’ of John Milton’s *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) or the ‘self-evident truth’ that ‘all men are created equal’ of Thomas Jefferson’s *Declaration of*

Independence (1776)) to the abstract singularity and universality of Rousseau's and Paine's 'Man' that, as we shall see, a full-blown essentialist humanism is generated.¹¹

Of course, 'universality' is a tricky notion, and universals may not always be quite as generously inclusive as they would have us suppose. It does not seem to have occurred to Jefferson and his colleagues to extend the universal freedom of the *Declaration* to their own or their neighbours' slaves. Mary Wolstonecraft's response to Paine (and to his *bête noire*, Edmund Burke) was to issue a *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that his own book appeared to have overlooked. And Karl Marx pointed out that the heady rhetoric of 'Universal Man' that accompanied the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tended to give way, once its ideological work was done, to the promotion of a rather narrower and more pragmatic set of class interests (Marx 1973b: 148–50). One of the effects of a universalising notion like 'Man' is to dissolve precisely such particularities as race, sex and class; and for that reason it is always prudent to ask what specific historical and local interests may be at work within grandly ecumenical notions like Symonds' 'point of unity for all that had been thought and done by man' or Arnold's 'central, truly human point of view': what the later nineteenth century dubbed, in lieu of the Christianity in which it could no longer believe, the 'religion of humanity'.

The phrase 'religion of humanity' is sometimes attributed to Paine, though I have not been able to find it in his surviving writings. Paine called himself a 'theophilanthropist', a word combining the Greek for 'God', 'love' and 'man', and indicating that while he believed in the existence of a creating intelligence in the universe, he entirely rejected the claims made by and for all existing religious doctrines, especially their miraculous, transcendental and salvationist pretensions. The Parisian 'Society of Theophilanthropy' which he sponsored, and whose inaugural address he gave in 1797, is described by his biographer as 'a forerunner of the ethical and humanist societies that proliferated

later' (Williamson 1973: 236); and the trenchantly witty *Age of Reason* (1793), which enraged the respectable even more than *The Rights of Man* had done, pours scorn on the supernatural pretensions of scripture, combining Voltairean mockery with Paine's own style of taproom ridicule to expose the absurdity of a theology built on a collection of incoherent Levantine folktales.

The Age of Reason forms a link between what Lyotard calls 'the two major versions of the narrative of legitimation': the abstractly rationalistic critique of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* and the radical historical theology, no less destructive of traditional pieties, of nineteenth-century biblical scholars like David Friedrich Strauss and his younger English contemporary Charles Hennell. The first is political, largely French in inspiration, and projects 'humanity as the hero of liberty'. The second is philosophical, German, seeks the totality and autonomy of knowledge, and stresses *understanding* rather than *freedom* as the key to human fulfilment and emancipation.¹² The two themes converge and compete in complex ways throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, and between them set the boundaries of its various humanisms. It was a reading of Hennell's *Inquiry into the Origins of Christianity* (1838) that helped a young writer called Mary Ann Evans to articulate her own increasingly sceptical ideas about official Christianity, ideas she was to develop more fully in translations of Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu* (*The Life of Jesus*, 1846) and Ludwig Feuerbach's ardently Hegelian *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (*The Essence of Christianity*, 1854), and finally, as 'George Eliot', in a series of novels informed by her conviction that

the fellowship between man and man which has been the principle of development, social and moral, is not dependent on conceptions of what is not man . . . the idea of God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human (i.e. an exaltation of the human).

(Haight 1954–5: 98)

THE RELIGION OF HUMANITY

The idea that 'God' is simply the projection or externalisation of as yet unrealised human qualities and aspirations indicates the degree to which the young George Eliot's thinking was shaped by the romantic humanism of Feuerbach's '*homo homini deus est*' ('man is god to man', or 'god is [nothing other than] man to himself'). But the writer who supplied the most systematic account of a secular 'religion of humanity', and who gave it for a while a currency and controversial immediacy to rival anything by Marx or Darwin, was the French 'positivist' Auguste Comte. A universe without supernatural sanction or presence, Comte argued, can be fully understood only by the scientific description of 'positive' phenomena, stripped of the sentimental pieties of traditional religion or romantic pantheism. As for human beings in that godless universe, their moral and social coexistence has no basis to appeal to beyond their own resources – themselves the result of the evolutionary development of the species – of sympathetic fellow-feeling. 'The human kind', as George Eliot herself wrote in her Comtean poem 'The Spanish Gypsy', 'Finds nowhere shelter but in human kind'.

Comte himself argued in his *Système de politique positive* (1851–4) for the construction of an atheistic religion (*culte*) founded on humanist principles, complete with doctrines and liturgy; and although George Eliot had reservations about Comte, and remained uncommitted to the final systematisation of his ideas, she warmly endorsed the project of an ethical religion designed to occupy the place vacated by a discredited Christianity. This is the 'religion of humanity' that so engrossed positivists like her partner G.H. Lewes and their friend Frederic Harrison, who in 1877 wrote urging her to state publicly 'your judgement of a Religion of Humanity as a possible rallying point for mankind in the future', appealing especially on behalf of those half-hearted Comteans like herself 'who reject it [the full systematic rigour of the *Politique positive*, recently translated

by Harriet Martineau] in different degrees but converge to the general idea of Humanity, as the ultimate centre of life and of thought' (Haight 1968: 506).

Her hesitation is not difficult to understand. If Comte dismantles the institutional and liturgical apparatus of Catholic Christianity, he puts in its place a set of structures and observances every bit as rigid and elaborate. Comte's secular religion is no vague effusion of benevolent humanist piety, but a complete system of belief and ritual, with liturgy and sacraments, priesthood and pontiff, all organised around the public veneration of Humanity, the *Grand Etre* (Great Being), later to be supplemented in a positivist trinity by the *Grand Fétich* (the Earth) and the *Grand Milieu* (Destiny).

The Church of Humanity set up along these lines by Comte's English acolytes soon declined, via the usual schisms and internal wranglings, into a tiny sect of lugubrious fundamentalists. But the informal influence of the cult, with its injunction to 'live for others' (*vivre pour autrui*, from which we get the word 'altruism'), its practice of meditative reflection on the image and example of an idealised Madonna-figure, and its slightly dispiriting vision of a small sphere of human action encompassed on all sides by the vast indifferent presences of nature and history, percolated deeply into the fibre of late-Victorian middle-class thinking. (It was this kind of thing, earnest and glumly improving, that led Oscar Wilde, the shrewdest as well as the funniest critic of conventional liberal pieties, to pray for a socialism that, by an equitable distribution of duties and pleasures, would emancipate humankind from 'that sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody'.)¹³ Comte's anti-imperialism (he argued for the independence of India, Algeria and all other colonial dependencies) appealed to socialists and radicals like George Holyoake (one of the founders of the co-operative movement) and E.S. Beesly, and Comtean slogans were used by republicans and anti-slavery campaigners in the Brazilian revolution.

His cult of the ideal woman, confined entirely to a domestic and inspirational role, appears again in the figure of the 'angel in the house', familiarised for Victorian readers by John Ruskin's essay 'Of Queen's Gardens'.¹⁴ And his hostility towards every variety of supernaturalism and metaphysical idealism helped to propel the popular conception of humanism towards an identification with atheism and secularism that persists to the present day in such essentially nineteenth-century organisations as the Rationalist Press Association, the Ethical Union, and the National Secular Society (Blackham 1976: 129ff.).

Most of all, Comtean ideas inform the work of many of the major novelists of the later nineteenth century – Emile Zola, George Eliot, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy. Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of *Middlemarch* (1871–2), herself, like her author, a Madonna-figure venerated by her admirers, learns in her second marriage (the first having been a disastrous misjudgement) to accept the limitations of the possible, and to resign herself to the sphere of altruistic influence prescribed by a Comtean sexual regime; and the text firmly rebukes any character or reader who may be moved to protest:

No life would have been possible to Dorothea which was not filled with emotion, and she had now a life filled also with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself . . . Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help. Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done.¹⁵

Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) opens with a description of a tract of Wessex heathland that might be a concrete

metaphor for the indifferent, irreducible materiality of the Comtean universe:

The untameable, Ishmaelitish thing that Egdon now was it had always been. Civilization was its enemy . . . To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley of Egdon, between afternoon and night, as now, where the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heathland which filled the whole circumference of its glance, and to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change¹⁶

and against the background of this 'great inviolable place', Hardy unfolds the story of Clym Yeobright, a young man in whose face 'could be dimly seen the typical countenance of the future' (*ibid.* 167). Yeobright's advanced ideas have been fostered by a period of study in Paris, 'where he had become acquainted with ethical systems popular at the time'; his dead mother lives in his memory as 'the sublime saint whose radiance even his tenderness for [his wife] Eustacia could not obscure' (*ibid.* 363); and he finds his vocation at last in that most positivist of occupations,

the career of an itinerant open-air preacher and lecturer on morally unimpeachable subjects . . . He left alone creeds and systems of philosophy, finding enough and more than enough to occupy his tongue in the opinions and actions common to all good men.

(*ibid.* 364–5)

In this homespun English appropriation of Comtean humanism, in contrast to Feuerbachian idealism, 'Man' figures not as an essential starting-point but as a destination, less a given set of intrinsic qualities than the goal of an epochal and never-to-be-completed process. If there is a 'human condition', it is the condition of being always

unconsummated, oscillating ceaselessly between the desire for fulfilment and the consciousness of failure. This is the condition that the nineteenth century called tragic, and identified with modernity. Hardy called it ‘the tragedy of unfulfilled aims’, and embodied it with searing poignancy in Sue Bridehead and Jude Fawley, the hopeful, questing, doomed protagonists of his most radically searching novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1896). George Eliot explored it in Maggie Tulliver, the clever miller’s daughter in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and Tertius Lydgate, the ambitious young physician in *Middlemarch*.

But whether in its tragic or its progressive register, the human predicament figured in nineteenth-century fiction is as pervasive and unchanging as the ‘eternal note of sadness’ that Arnold heard in the tidal ebb and return of ‘Dover Beach’:

Sophocles long ago
 Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
 Of human misery; we
 Find also in the sound a thought,
 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The painterly realism of setting and detail, the careful notation of idiom and inflection, serve only to underline the essential timelessness of its enactments. ‘It isn’t Boston – it’s humanity!’, retorts the campaigning feminist Olive Chancellor, in Henry James’ *The Bostonians*, when her southern cousin expresses a wish to visit her home town.¹⁷ Humanity, the humanistic ‘Man’ (always singular, always in the present tense), inhabits not a time or a place but a condition, timeless and unlocalised.

This is the burden of Friedrich Nietzsche’s radical insight, itself the starting-point for many of the twentieth-century ‘antihumanisms’ that will be explored in later chapters. ‘All philosophers’, he wrote in his sardonic critique of contemporary humanism, *Human All Too Human* (1880),

involuntarily think of 'man' as an *aeterna veritas* [eternal truth], as something that remains constant in the midst of all flux, as a sure measure of things . . . Lack of historical sense is the family failing of all philosophers; many, without being aware of it, even take the most recent manifestation of man, such as has arisen under the impress of certain religions, even certain political events, as the fixed form from which one has to start out . . . But everything has become: there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths.

(Hollingdale 1973: 60–1)

'What is needed from now on', he concluded, 'is historical philosophising, and with it' – a quality with which Nietzsche's name has not often been associated – 'the virtue of modesty'. By modesty he meant a healthy willingness to resist the temptation to confuse our own dispositions and values with some universal and eternal 'human condition'. This he conceived to be one of the four cardinal errors – the others being self-ignorance, the attribution of imaginary qualities to the world around us and 'a false order of rank with animal and nature' – which sustain the humanist delusion, and of which he remarked acidly that 'if one deducts the effect of these four errors, one has also deducted away humanity, humaneness and "human dignity"' (Hollingdale 1973: 65).

That remark is a good example of the kind of thing that makes some readers of Nietzsche feel queasy. His sister Elizabeth became in her later years an enthusiastic disciple of the *Führer*, and encouraged the notion that her late brother would have been a keen admirer too. Certainly the Nazis themselves, even then engaged in systematically 'deducting away' humanity on a scale that still beggars imagination, were happy to accept the veneer of intellectual respectability afforded by this association, and misappropriated a number of Nietzschean tropes – the *Übermensch*, the 'blond beast' – into their own symbolic repertoire. The fact that Martin Heidegger, the most – perhaps the only –

serious thinker to commit himself wholeheartedly to Nazism, wrote extensively and approvingly about Nietzsche gave the association a certain credibility. And since it still has some currency, not least in the more intellectual type of neo-Nazi propaganda, it is worth stressing that what is at stake in the Nietzschean critique of the four errors and the 'deduction of humanity' is not the endorsement of some proto-fascist brutality and humiliation but the analysis of one of the central myths of nineteenth-century civilisation, its 'religion of humanity', among whose monstrous offspring Nazism itself can be numbered.

2

FROM HUMANISM TO ANTIHUMANISM

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.

(Michel Foucault)

NIETZSCHE: HUMANISM AS METAPHOR AND ILLUSION

The relationship between humanism and antihumanism should not be seen as one of pure negation or hostility. Not only do most antihumanisms, as Kate Soper puts it, ‘secrete a humanist rhetoric’ (Soper 1986: 182) that betrays their hidden affinity with what they deny; they generally serve openly humanist ends of intellectual clarity and emancipation, articulated around a recognisable ethic of human capacity and need. Nietzsche, the doyen of philosophical antihumanists, was as surely a product of German humanism as his friend Burckhardt; and though his membership of the academic establishment, which he joined in 1869 as a twenty-four-year-old Professor of Classical Philology at the University of Basle, was effectively terminated by the publication

three years later of the provocatively unprofessorial *Birth of Tragedy*, his struggle, in the sixteen years that remained before madness closed around him, to formulate a fundamental 'revaluation of all values' recurs constantly to humanist themes and figures. Like Burckhardt, he reads the history of modernity as 'the development of the individual', and especially of those exceptional 'complete men' who, confronted with the 'death of God', the absence of any transcendental guarantee of meaning or value, rise above despair to recreate themselves as the bearers of a radical freedom. This heroic transcendence, through the exercise of a 'will to power' that drives every individual to the fullest possible self-realisation, is what Nietzsche calls the *Übermensch* or 'superman'.

At the same time, certain features of his own humanist apprenticeship put Nietzsche in a position to expose the illusory or fraudulent pretensions of much nineteenth-century humanism. First, as we have seen, the historicism of the classical-Hegelian curriculum alerted him to the provisional and historical character of even the most universalist appeals to an essential humanity. Second, the Lutheran pietism of his upbringing, though soon rejected, left him sharply sensitive to the residual and coercive theology that lurks inside the 'religion of humanity' and other such schemes of secular salvationism, and the tendency of such schemes to conceal quite disreputable motivations (he preferred to call himself a psychologist rather than a philosopher) beneath their professions of universal altruism. Third, and most radical of all, the classicist's habit of looking at propositions philologically (Michel Foucault remarked that all Nietzsche's work was 'no more than the exegesis of a few Greek words') revealed the inescapably figurative nature of all statements:

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymics, anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations which, poetically and rhetorically intensified, became transposed and

adorned, and which after long usage by a people seem fixed, canonical and binding on them. Truths are illusions which one has forgotten *are* illusions, worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the sense.

(Nietzsche 1973: 46)

This ‘linguistic turn’, which Nietzsche called the ‘ultimate scepticism’, and whose effects can be seen in the ‘language-games’ of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, the ‘discursive formations’ anatomised by Foucault and the ‘deconstructive’ analyses of Jacques Derrida, undermines the credentials of humanism not only in its more inflated or self-serving pretensions but at the very heart. For if the ‘humanity’ to which it appeals is nothing more than a figure of speech, a metaphor so moribund and inert that we no longer recognise it as such, then what is humanism but a bladder full of hot air?

Nietzsche was not insensitive to the implications of this insight for his own writing. Unlike other philosophers, before and since, he offers his ideas not as truth-statements but as poetic fictions, parables, images, which he makes no attempt to separate from his own mood, temperament and personal circumstances. Indeed, he argued that all statements must be read as metaphors of a particular disposition – physical, psychological, even digestive (he himself was a vegetarian). Distinctions between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’, philosophy and poetry, have no meaning. For the philosopher who wrote that ‘I do not know what purely intellectual problems are’, and that ‘one must want to experience the great problems with one’s body and one’s soul’, the only grounds that remain for distinguishing between statements are the strength, authenticity and beauty with which they are uttered: their ‘will to power’.

Clearly, this could be (and has been) used to license a good deal of unscrupulous lying, bullying and – harnessed to an anti-Semitic nationalism that Nietzsche himself abominated – much worse. But

such risks, for a philosopher whose motto was 'live dangerously', were unavoidable. While Comte tried to cobble up a makeshift quasi-religion on the site and the sentiments vacated by the collapse of Christianity, Nietzsche's intuition was more radical, and more disturbing: that for a civilisation so saturated in Judaeo-Christian beliefs and values that even its atheisms sound like liturgical pieties, the 'death of God' signals not only the end of theology but the demise of truth in all its forms, the unravelling of meaning itself. In those circumstances, bereft of authority and faced with nihilistic despair, there is nothing to do but start from scratch with what remains: a rebellious bundle of bodily and psychic needs, a deep urge to survive and transcend, a treacherous and indispensable language.

Nietzsche apart, some of the most searching criticism of the positivist 'religion of humanity' came from the philosopher and political economist John Stuart Mill. Mill admired Comte, acknowledging that with all its pompous absurdities the cult of the Great Being was an attempt to appease a genuine hunger for meaning, to replenish the ideological vacancy that had been created by the feebleness and irrelevance of the Church in the face of capitalist civilisation. The objection to Comte, Mill argued, lay not in the notion of a secular religion itself but in the ruthlessness with which he subordinated the variety of human interest and need to a single system. The *System of Positive Politics*, he argued, portended 'a despotism of society over the individual, surpassing anything contemplated in the political ideal of the most rigid disciplinarian among the ancient philosophers' (Mill 1969: 338). Anticipating many a later confrontation between English pragmatism and Gallic 'theory', he found the root of the problem

in an original mental twist, very common in French thinkers, and by which M. Comte was distinguished beyond them all. He could not dispense with what he called 'unity'. The *fons errorum* in M. Comte's later speculations is this inordinate demand for 'unity' and 'systematization' . . . Why is it necessary that all human life should

point but to one object, and be cultivated into a system of means to a single end?

(Mill 1969: 336)

Mill was the son of a prominent utilitarian, a friend and colleague of the Great Cham of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham. His recoil from the emotional aridity of his father's ideas is vividly recounted in his autobiography, in which he recalls the experience, after years of enduring James Mill's unrelentingly cerebral regime of domestic instruction (starting with Greek at the age of three), of discovering the poetry of Wordsworth.¹ But the younger Mill retained much of the utilitarian programme, including its oddly joyless computations of happiness (the 'felicific calculus') and the radical individualism that Bentham shared with contemporaries like Thomas Paine and William Blake. 'May it not be the fact', he asked,

that mankind, who after all are made up of single human beings, obtain a greater sum of happiness when each pursues his own, under the rules and conditions required by the greater good of the rest?

(Mill 1969: 336-7)

Comte, in contrast, thinks of humanity as an undifferentiated mass, waiting to be bullied and cajoled by the enlightened few into a programmed uniformity of spiritual felicity (a verdict echoed more brutally, eighty years later, by Jean-Paul Sartre (1948: 55): 'The cult of humanity ends in Comtian humanism, shut-in upon itself, and – this must be said – in Fascism').

Liberty and spontaneity on the part of individuals form no part of the scheme . . . Every particular of conduct, public or private, is to be open to the public eye, and to be kept, by the power of opinion, in the course which the spiritual corporation shall judge to be the most right.

(Mill 1969: 327)

Liberty and spontaneity: the coupling of the two themes discloses the ideological lineage, with all its ambiguities, of the liberal humanism of which Mill, the political economist whose writings *On Liberty* (1859) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869) enjoy classic status in the liberal canon, is a founding figure. 'Liberty' recalls the Miltonic and Rousseauist complexion of radical enlightenment, with its discourse of individual rights and freedoms, guaranteed by reason and natural law; while 'spontaneity' evokes the sister-tradition, 'romantic' and anti-rationalist, of Wordsworthian feeling. Marx called this interweaving of romantic and utilitarian strains in Victorian liberalism a 'legitimate antithesis', meaning that there was no genuine contradiction between the two, merely an alternation of moods in the bourgeois disposition (Marx 1973a: 162). In the sense that the romantic revolt against the chilly despotism of enlightened reason, Keats' call for 'a life of sensations rather than a life of thoughts', is a revolt in gesture only, he was of course right.² We might add, too, that in tempering the 'masculine' discipline of rational freedom with the 'feminine' attractions of imaginative spontaneity, liberal humanism served both to obscure and to legitimise the real contradictions of capitalist and patriarchal 'liberty'. But the antithesis can still generate its own force and drama, especially when, as in the confrontation between the chilly pragmatism of the utilitarian Gradgrind and the disreputable human warmth of the circus-master Sleary in Dickens' *Hard Times* (1870), its tensions are fully exposed, and it has proved a remarkably durable constant in English cultural and political life over the last hundred years. Prose and poetry, reason and emotion, hard fact and imaginative value, the 'two cultures' of technology and art: the oppositions engage and disengage compulsively, marking out the resilient strengths of the 'English ideology' as well as its disabling limitations.

LIBERAL HUMANISM

‘The Utilitarian social philosophy of Jeremy Bentham,’ writes a recent historian of humanism,

leavened and made wholesome by John Stuart Mill’s postscript ‘On Liberty’, translated into a modern idiom and brought up to date with new possibilities, new necessities and new dangers, is the humanist social philosophy today, and substantially will be permanently so.

(Blackham 1976: 55)

But this complacent assurance of continuity and permanence, though dispiritingly typical of much contemporary humanism, fails to register the growing desperation of the humanist project in the decades either side of the First World War. After Mill, perhaps the most talismanic figure for an increasingly troubled and sceptical liberal humanism is the novelist and essayist E.M. Forster, many of whose formulations of its central dilemmas have acquired a proverbial currency. His hope that, faced with the choice of betraying a friend or betraying his country, ‘I should have the guts to betray my country’, like his decision to offer no more than ‘two cheers for Democracy’ on the grounds that ‘only Love, the Beloved Republic’ deserves three, expresses the categorical priority of concrete individuals over abstract systems, of the private over the public, while regretfully acknowledging the inescapable claims of the latter (Forster 1965: 76, 78); and the defining antithesis itself is expressed in his famous injunction to ‘connect the prose and the passion . . . Live in fragments no longer, only connect’ (Forster 1941: 174–5).

This is the characteristic timbre of English liberal humanism: small-scale, individualist, suspicious of big theories and sweeping solutions. Forster’s affinities as a novelist are with the understated ironies and obliquities of Jane Austen rather than the Comtean homiletics of George Eliot; and as a thinker, his ‘law-givers’, he

wrote in 1939, 'are Erasmus and Montaigne, not Moses and St Paul' (1965: 75), an antithesis which might have puzzled the Christian humanists of the sixteenth century, but which signals a preference for the dialogical and ironic over the solemnly monological, for scepticism over belief, questions over answers. The modest affiliations of friendship and the claims of personal loyalty take precedence always over the regimented compulsions of system, movement or cause.

The phrase 'only connect' occurs in his 'condition of England' novel *Howards End* (1910), whose plot reads like an allegory of the troubled polarities of liberal humanism. Margaret Schlegel, musical, cultured, Anglo-German (her very name associates her allusively with the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, one of the pivotal figures of romantic *Humanismus*), inherits the country house of the title from a friend, then restores it to its original ownership by marrying the friend's widowed husband, the prosaic businessman Henry Wilcox. The connection seems complete, the antitheses of industry and culture, prose and passion, satisfyingly resolved. But not entirely. As one chapter reminds us, with a sardonic acknowledgement that a novel of this kind, minutely attentive to the finely-tuned sensibilities of the cultivated and the well-to-do, cannot transcend the ideology that constitutes it: 'We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable' (Forster 1941: 44). The circles of civilised 'connection' are sympathetically but firmly closed to the plebeian, the philistine, the too earnestly aspiring. But the home-counties idyll of the Schlegels and Wilcoxes is irreparably disrupted nonetheless by the plaintive presence and violent death of the suburban bank clerk Leonard Bast, lower-middle-class and pathetically hungry for 'culture', whose posthumous child Margaret's sister is carrying as the novel moves to its uneasy ending.

If the closure of *Howards End* seems troubled and irresolute, the final pages of Forster's next (and last) novel, *A Passage to India* (1924), feel more like deadlock. In the last of the novel's three

‘movements’, the young Muslim physician Aziz, acquitted in a dramatic court-case of sexual assault on an Englishwoman, but deeply embittered by the experience and now active in the independence movement, meets an old friend, the liberal-minded English schoolteacher Fielding, and they go riding together. ‘Why’, asks the Englishman, invoking the deepest touchstone of Forsterian humanism, ‘can’t we be friends now?’ But at that moment

they swerved apart; the earth didn’t want it, sending up rocks through which the riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath; they didn’t want it, they said in their hundred voices, ‘No, not yet,’ and the sky said, ‘No, not there’.

(Forster 1961: 317)

The novel, and Forster’s career as a novelist, come to a halt there, half-hopeful, half-despairing, suspended in a limbo of baffled disconnection. Fielding mocks the ‘abstract hate’ of his friend’s independence rhetoric (‘India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! . . . Hurrah for India!’), and the text acknowledges the mockery as just, but the idea that friendship between Englishman and Indian can heal centuries of systematic prejudice and exploitation is revealed as no less absurd, a notion at once evasive and condescending.

The critic F.R. Leavis called *A Passage to India* ‘a classic of the liberal spirit’,³ but it is just as surely one of its limit-texts, exposing the impotence of humanist decency in the face of racism, and its unhappy but inescapable complicity with the realities of imperial rule. The genre of the novel, at least of the kind of novel that Forster remained faithful to, rooted as it is in the primacy of relationships between rational individuals and essentially comic in spirit even when tragic in circumstance, is the liberal-humanist form

par excellence, and Forster's decision to abandon it after the impasse of his Indian story says something of wider significance about the demoralisation of liberal opinion in the grim decades between the two world wars, and something too about its incapacity. In an essay on 'Jew-consciousness' published in 1939, Forster deplored the resurgence of anti-Semitic prejudice and advised his readers that 'for the moment, all that we can do is to dig in our heels, and prevent silliness from sliding into insanity' (1965: 26). Judgement is never easy, in the thick of things, and hindsight is the cheapest of complacencies; but to think of anti-Semitism, then, only weeks before the German invasion of Poland, as a 'silliness' that can still be prevented by sensible people digging in their heels betrays the limitations of an individualistic humanism that sees only trees, not forests, and sees them from the standpoint of a cultivated English leisure-class intellectual, a latter-day Tom Brown for whom 'if the average man is anyone in particular he is a preparatory school boy' (*ibid.*: 24).

It is instructive to compare Forster with a contemporary novelist and humanist, the German Thomas Mann. Mann shared Forster's commitment to the irrevocable priority of the rational and human, along with his distaste for the regimental vulgarities of mass politics and ideology. In 1918, amid the wreckage of the First World War, he had contended that the blame for the war must be attributed to the hijacking by political demagogues of the concept of 'humanity',

this favourite word of rhetorical democracy, which has been anointed with all the oils of French rhetoric and Anglo-Saxon cant,

and argued that an authentic humanism could have no commerce with politics of any kind:

it has never seemed possible to me that anyone could disagree that 'humanity', a human way of thinking and observing, obviously signifies the opposite of all politics. To think and to

reflect in a human way means to think and to reflect in a non-political way.⁴

But by the later thirties, while Forster was deploring Nazism as a schoolboy 'silliness' or at worst 'insanity', Mann had concluded that it was precisely the fastidious political abstinence of liberal bourgeois like himself that had permitted it to happen, and that he could not absolve his class and his generation of responsibility for the approaching catastrophe.

That realisation is the subject of Mann's most searching exploration of the relations between humanist and Nazi rationalities, the novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947). The decision to rework the Faust story has a special resonance, for the semi-legendary figure of Georg (in some versions Johann) Faust or (the latinized form) Faustus of Wittenburg, magus and diabolist, haunts the German imagination, articulating its deepest anxieties at critical moments of change and confrontation. The revolutionary antinomies of rational enlightenment and romantic transcendence find their definitive expression in Goethe's dramatic poem *Faust*. Nietzsche, developing Heine's theme, characterised the German temperament as an antithesis of philistine and Faustian qualities. For the Munich *Gymnasium* teacher Oswald Spengler, chronicler of *The Decline of the West*, the Faustian signified not only Germany but European *Humanismus* as a whole, then (1918) about to enter its final twilight. But strictly Teutonic associations of *Volk* and *Geist* dominate later readings of the figure, increasingly so as German nationalism approaches its demonic pact with fascism. Herman Amonn (*Dämon Faust*, 1932) found in Goethe's poem an allegory of 'the development of the Faustian, that is of German culture'; while Alfred Rosenberg, ideologue of early Nazism and purveyor of the anti-Semitic imposture called the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1923), wrote in *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930) that 'Goethe presents in *Faust* our undying *essence*, which lies behind every outpouring of our spirit in its new guise' (Smeed 1975: 29-30).

This is the background to Mann's story of the composer Adrian Leverkühn, whose innovative genius is the reward for a Faustian bargain that plunges him finally into madness and death even as Germany itself rushes towards self-immolation around him. The story is told by Leverkühn's childhood friend Serenus Zeitblom, professor of Classics and humanist, who represents with comic pomposity the values of enlightened *Bildung* ('Here, as so often,' he muses contentedly, 'I cannot help dwelling on the inward, the almost mysterious connexion of the old philological interest with a lively and loving sense of the beauty and dignity of reason in the human being'²⁵), and whose appalled observation of his friend's imaginative derangement forces him to confront the intolerable coupling of the rational and the demonic, Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionysus, within the genius of European civilisation itself.

Early in the novel the philhellenic Zeitblom recalls a youthful visit to Athens, during which, standing upon the Acropolis, and looking down on the Sacred Way along which the initiates had once made their way to Eleusis to celebrate the ritual mysteries of the goddess Demeter, he

experienced by divination the rich feeling of life which expressed itself in the initiate veneration of Olympic Greece for the deities of the depths; often, later on, I explained to my pupils that culture is in very truth the pious and regulating, I might say propitiatory, entrance of the dark and uncanny into the service of the gods.

(*ibid.*: 15)

But nothing in his complacent academicism can prepare him for the true horror of the dark and uncanny, as it erupts in his friend and his country, and about which there is nothing remotely 'pious and regulating'. The desolating 'panic and emptiness' that lie always in ambush for Forster's hopes of human connection assume in Mann's novel the concrete form of the hero's syphilitic dementia

and his country's 'monstrous national perversion', and Zeitblom's plaintive questions,

Shall I once more impress upon the hearts of my top-form pupils in the humanities the cultural ideas in which reverence for the deities of the depths blends with the civilized cult of Olympian reason and clarity . . . Must I not ask myself whether or not I did right?

(ibid.: 485)

fall unanswered into an abyss of futility and self-reproach.

Forster and Mann have much in common. Both represent, with clarity and candour, the virtues, and the final insufficiency, of the heritage of nineteenth-century liberal humanism. For both, as it happens, those virtues – rationality, belief in human progress, courageous individuality – were embodied most fully not in literature but in music, above all the music of Beethoven, the composer who more than any other incarnates the values and contradictions of enlightened and romantic *Humanismus*. In *Howards End*, the Fifth Symphony conjures the spectral goblins of panic and emptiness only to cast them out in the last movement in a Promethean affirmation of reason and order (Forster 1941: 33); and in *Doctor Faustus* another great work in C minor and major, the last piano sonata opus 111, is offered as the touchstone of demonic energy and terror harnessed to rational sympathy and control.⁶ Both wrote through and about the last days of empires. Both recognised, as others less honest or perceptive have failed to do, that the humanist and the imperialist share a common patrimony, and that amid the débâcle of empire humanism too must be called to account.

MODERNISM AND ANTIHUMANISM

The major challenge, when it comes, is philosophical and ideological, and issues from the continental heartland of philosophical humanism

itself: Heidegger, Adorno, Althusser, Foucault. But a critique of humanism has already played an important part in the theoretical formulation of literary modernism in the earlier part of the century. Rejecting what T.E. Hulme called the 'slop and romanticism' of an art expressive of human experience and aspiration, Anglo-American modernists called for an aesthetic of 'geometric' impersonality (Hulme 1924: 77). W.B. Yeats abandoned romantic nationalism ('all that is personal soon rots') in favour of a poetry 'cold and passionate as the dawn'. 'Don't look in my novel for the old stable Ego of the character,' advised D.H. Lawrence, and T.S. Eliot insisted that 'poetry is not the expression of personality, it is an escape from personality', that 'there should be the greatest possible distance between the man that suffers and the mind that creates'.⁷ Antihumanism, as Kate Soper remarks, frequently 'secretes a humanist rhetoric' (Soper 1986: 128), and it is true that Eliot's antithesis of suffering 'man' (as ever) and creative 'mind' merely reformulates the Kantian distinction between the 'phenomenal' world and our 'noumenal' knowledge of it. But the impulse behind literary modernism betrays an authentic antihumanism, indeed a revulsion against the human; 'a desire for austerity and bareness', Hulme called it, 'a striving towards structure and away from the messiness and confusion of nature and natural things' (1924: 96).

In his hatred of romantic and liberal-humanist 'slop', Hulme outdistanced even Nietzsche, whom he dubiously associated with a Burkhardtian nostalgia for the Renaissance:

There are people who, disgusted with romanticism, wish for us to go back to the classical period, or who, like Nietzsche, wish us to admire the Renaissance. But such partial reactions will always fail, for they are only half measures – it is no good returning to humanism, for that will itself degenerate into romanticism.

(Hulme 1924: 62)

Against this, he advocated the ‘religious attitude’, itself not easily distinguishable, for all its air of ultra-modernity, from a regressive turn to the pre-humanist ‘middle ages’, the ‘austerity and bareness’ of the monastic life, the security and ‘structural’ impersonality of an infallible Church. ‘Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them,’ wrote Eliot; ‘there is no third.’⁸ Dante, hieratic, devotional, uncompromising (in Eliot’s account, at least: no trace of Burckhardt’s or Symonds’ proto-humanist here⁹), confronts Shakespeare, supreme chronicler of the human in all its ‘messiness and confusion’, and the confrontation does not permit compromise.

I have called this modernist antihumanism ‘aesthetic’, but of course it is political too. ‘Before Copernicus’, Hulme told an audience in 1914, deftly hijacking Burckhardt’s narrative of heroic individualism only to explode it,

man was not the centre of the world; after Copernicus he was. You get a change from a certain profundity and intensity to that flat and insipid optimism which, passing through its first stage of decay in Rousseau, has finally culminated in the state of slush in which we have the misfortune to live . . . the re-emergence of geometrical art may be the precursor of the re-emergence of the corresponding attitude towards the world, and so, of the break up of the Renaissance humanistic attitude.

(Hulme 1924: 80)

The search for a lost profundity and intensity led Hulme, as it was to lead Eliot, to an admiration for the Catholic and royalist authoritarianism of Charles Maurras’ proto-fascist *Action Française*. The same impulse turned Ezra Pound into an eccentric but energetically committed apologist for full-blown fascism. In Pound’s case it also inspired one of the more baroque conspiracy theories of modern times, in which the filthy ‘slop’ and ‘slush’ of humanist sentimentality (‘an old bitch gone in the teeth’) was identified with

the double menace threatening the renewal of Aryan civilisation: women and Jews. Abandoning his earlier hope of 'driving any new idea into the great passive vulva of London', he retired to fascist Pisa, where the hysterical machismo and xenophobia of Mussolini's bombast provided a more congenial context for his musings on the twin evils of contraception and usury, and the danger they posed for that 'great clot of seminal fluid', the (male) artist's brain.¹⁰

The question 'Who is man?', Martin Heidegger told students of his Nietzsche seminar at the University of Freiburg in the soon-to-be-interrupted summer semester of 1939, 'is not as harmless as it might seem'.

This question is to be Europe's task for the future, for this century and the century to come. It can find its answer only in the exemplary and authoritative way in which particular nations, in competition with others, shape their history.

(Heidegger 1984: 102)

Like many others in that fateful summer, Heidegger was well aware that the impending contest of nations would be of a scale and consequence unparalleled in the history of conflict. He saw it, indeed, as the transition from 'the preparatory phase of the modern age – the time between 1600 and 1900 – to the beginning of its consummation', a process whose outcome could not be guaranteed.

We do not know the time-span of this consummation. Presumably, it will either be very brief and catastrophic or else very long, in the sense of a self-perpetuating arrangement of what has been attained. There is no room for halfway measures in the present stage of the history of our planet . . . at some point and in some way the historical decision arises as to whether this final age is the conclusion of Western history or the counterpart of another beginning.

(Heidegger 1987: 6, 8)

Few of those who survived it are likely to have looked back on the period that began with the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, and ended with the atomic devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Japanese surrender in August 1945, as a second Renaissance. For many, it looked more like the end, not of an era, but of a world: the death of an idea, a terminus of the humanly conceivable. Who, faced with the reality of those years, could still retrieve anything usable in the idea of the human: the global scale and indiscriminate totality of the slaughter, the contemptuous brutality and humiliation inflicted on prisoners, partisans and resident populations in Burma, Central Europe and the Balkans, above all the realisation, as the camps were opened and the films, the photographs, the meticulous documentation unearthed, of the unfathomable cold horror of the *Endlösung*, the 'final solution' to the 'racial problem'? The very word, like the apocalyptic *Götterdämmerung* fantasies of the Nazi intellectuals who coined it, suggests a sinister terminality. But for all the Wagnerian and gothic primitivism in which the Third Reich chose to project its public personality, there was no escaping the recognition that the systematic purging of Jews, homosexuals and other racial impurities was the result not of some inexplicable descent into irrational, atavistic barbarity but of a supremely modern rationality. The cool framing of objectives, the logical planning of complex systems, the orderly deployment of technology and resources: all these testify to a piece of demographic engineering as measured in its symmetry, as eloquent in its appalling fashion of individual genius and collective enterprise as the Parthenon itself.

In the face of this, it seemed, not only humanism – the rational self-assertive world-changing humanism of the Greeks, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment – but the very notion of the *human* was called to account. Confronted with the death-camps, George Steiner has argued, language itself falls silent. Theodor Adorno, for whom they only made explicit the ruthless will to

power that had always been implicit in the project of rational 'enlightenment', believed that they had cancelled the possibility of poetry, the unconstrained voice of humanist individuality. For the camp commanders, like their masters in Berlin, were lovers of poetry, not brutes; and language itself, Hamlet's 'discourse of reason', could not be acquitted of complicity in their monstrous undertaking.¹¹ For the post-war generations, what has come to be known as the *Shoah* or Holocaust represents the vanishing point, the absolute zero of what is thinkable. In spite of the vast amount that has been written and said about it – the novels and memoirs, the sober academic treatises and the impassioned denunciations, the films, the justifications, even the denials that it ever happened at all – it presents what philosophers call an *aporia*, a dilemma or maze from which there is no exit. Or, perhaps, one of those tests which it is fatal to fail, and even more catastrophic to pass, like the Theban Sphinx's riddling question to the young Oedipus; the answer to which, according to the legend, was 'Man'.

THE TWILIGHT OF HUMANISM

Their eternal position in the divine order is something of which we are only conscious as a setting whose irrevocability can but serve to heighten the effect of their humanity, preserved for us in all its force. The result is a direct experience of life which overwhelms everything else, a comprehension of human realities which spreads as widely and variously as it goes to the very roots of our emotions, an illumination of man's impulses and passions which leads us to share in them without restraint and indeed to admire their variety and their greatness. And by virtue of this immediate and admiring sympathy with man, the principle, rooted in the divine order, of the indestructibility of the whole historical and individual man turns *against* that order, makes it subservient to its own purposes, and obscures it. The image of man eclipses the image of God . . . More accurately than antique literature was ever able to present it, we

are given to see, in the realm of timeless being, the history of man's inner life and unfolding.

(Auerbach 1968: 201–2)

That description of the characters in Dante's *Divine Comedy* was written, some time between May 1942 and April 1945, in Istanbul, where its author, the German scholar Erich Auerbach, was teaching at the Turkish State University. At first sight, the passage stands in unbroken continuity with Burckhardt, for whom the Florentine poet bestrides 'the boundary between medievalism and modern times', and who wrote that in his work 'the human spirit had taken a mighty step toward the consciousness of its own secret life' (Burckhardt 1958: 308). Like Arnold's Chaucer, Auerbach's Dante is the great proto-humanist, the first medieval writer to break out of the constraints of a theology in which human beings figure only as illustrative evidence of the power of an omnipotent deity (the ostensible structure of the poem) and to present them as independent beings, in all the three-dimensional variety of their historical and psychological individuality.

The subtitle of Auerbach's *Mimesis*, from which the passage is taken, is 'the representation of reality in Western literature', and specifically the development and eventual breakdown and transformation of what we now call 'realism'. But interwoven with that theme is another: the emergence of the 'human' as the central topic of European literature, a figure now also facing a possible dissolution. Starting (where else, in this tradition?) with Homer, the book traces a line that runs through Late Roman and medieval writing to humanists like Rabelais, Montaigne and Cervantes, and the fully-developed realism of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, and comes to rest at last in the post-realist fiction of Virginia Woolf, in whose dissolving and intermingling subjectivities Auerbach discerns the appearance of a new humanity, embodied not in the heroic individuals of epic, romance and realist narrative but in the anonymous ordinariness of common life:

To be sure, what happens in that moment – be it outer or inner processes – concerns in a very personal way the individuals who live in it, but it also (and for that very reason) concerns the elementary things which men in general have in common . . . The more numerous, varied, and simple the people are who appear as subjects of such random moments, the more effectively must what they have in common shine forth.

(Auerbach 1968: 552)

Furthermore, Woolf's 'unprejudiced and exploratory type of representation' must be seen as evidence of a change in the general conditions of life as momentous as that to which Dante in his time was witness, for in it 'we cannot but see to what an extent – below the surface conflicts – the differences between men's ways of life and forms of thought have already lessened' (ibid.: 552).

The 'surface conflicts' were hardly negligible. A contemplative eye might appreciate the poignant historical symmetry that led the last of the German humanists to write his history of European literature in the very city from which the Byzantine Chrysoloras had set out five and a half centuries before to instruct Dante's compatriots in the language of Homer. But for Auerbach, ousted by the Nazis from the chair of romance philology at the University of Marburg, the journey to neutral Istanbul was an act not of pilgrimage but of enforced exile. In beleaguered wartime Turkey, books were scarce; and written without the help of the scholarly libraries which western intellectuals have learnt to take for granted, *Mimesis* is above all an astonishing feat of recollection, the reconstruction of a two-thousand-year tradition at the very moment in which it is about to pass into memory.

It is also, unmistakably, an obituary. Though the 'common life of mankind on earth' which he detects in Woolf's mingling streams of consciousness is welcomed – there is none of his countryman Adorno's disgust for the 'massification of culture' – it is with regret and a certain foreboding:

the complicated process of dissolution which led to the fragmentation of the exterior action, to reflection of consciousness, and to stratification of time seems to be tending toward a very simple solution. Perhaps it will be too simple to please those who, despite all its dangers and catastrophes, admire and love our epoch for the sake of its abundance of life and the incomparable historical vantage point which it affords. But they are few in number, and probably they will not live to see much more than the first forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification.

(ibid.: 552-3)

For Auerbach, no less than for Forster, the realism of the great European novelists from Cervantes to Proust is the child of liberal humanism, and of the intellectual culture – leisured, bourgeois and ‘western’ – that nurtured it. Both went on writing and lecturing for several years after the war, Forster in Cambridge and Auerbach in Princeton; but both recognised that their era was over, and acknowledged that recognition in the concluding ‘not yet . . . not there’ of their finest work. In one of the most revealing chapters in *Mimesis*, Auerbach speculates on the implications of Goethe’s distaste for the revolutionary movements of his time, his unwillingness to relate the personal lives and intellectual interests of his characters to the public events and historical processes by which they were shaped. Goethe, he notes, ‘never represented the reality of contemporary social life dynamically, as the germ of developments in process and in the future’. Instead, when compelled to comment on public life, ‘he does so in general reflections, and these are almost always value judgements: they are predominantly mistrustful and disapproving’. The relevance of this to Auerbach’s contemporaries is unmistakable. Like Eliot and Leavis (on the ‘right’) or the ‘Frankfurt School’ of Adorno and Marcuse (on the ‘left’), Goethe felt a particular disapproval for the ‘technical development of

machinery' and 'the progressively conscious participation of the masses in public life', from which, like them, he feared 'a shallowing of intellectual life', with 'nothing to make up for such a loss'.

How precisely these anxieties foreshadow the debates about mechanisation and mass society in the twentieth century – debates which, in spite of a dashing 'postmodern' respray in recent years, have scarcely moved on since the fifties – needs no emphasis.¹² With rare exceptions, the reaction of humanist intellectuals to the industrialisation of social and cultural life and the emergence of mass politics has been one of patrician disdain or nauseated revulsion. But how differently things might have turned out, Auerbach muses, if Goethe, the prototype of Mann's 'unpolitical man', had been willing to engage himself with the popular movements which, in different circumstances, might have unified Germany in his lifetime.

If that had happened then, perhaps too the integration of Germany into the emerging new reality of Europe and the world might have been prepared more calmly, have been accomplished with fewer uncertainties and less violence . . . as we look back upon all that has happened since, we are tempted to imagine what effect might have been exerted upon German literature and German society, if Goethe, with his vigorous sensuality, his mastery of life, his far-reaching and untrammled vision, had devoted more interest and constructive effort to the emerging modern structure of life.

(Auerbach 1968: 451-2)

The figure that broods over this poignant reverie, written, probably, as the cities of Germany are engulfed in fire and Hitler's war-machine plunges towards its Faustian catastrophe, is of course the humanist paradigm: the Platonic philosopher-king, Machiavelli's Prince, Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. At the end, as at the beginning, the solitary thinker dreams, redrawing the world in the ideal symmetries of knowledge and power.

SOCIALIST HUMANISM AND THEORETICAL ANTIHUMANISM

In the summer of 1964 a little-known French Communist academic called Louis Althusser published in an obscure Communist Party journal an article on the subject of 'Marxism and Humanism', reprinted a couple of years later in a collection of essays *Pour Marx*, and translated into English in 1969 as *For Marx*. To anyone not professionally involved in the theoretical and political contentions of that excitable period, the influence and prestige of this highly technical and rather arid ten-page essay, and the heat it was able to generate, must seem astonishing. The most spectacular, if belated, response, for English-speaking readers, was the violent assault on Althusser, at times pungently witty and angry, but all too often tiresomely prolix and self-indulgent, in E.P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory* (1978). But for every reader provoked to Thompsonian indignation by the essay's coldly contemptuous dismissal of every variety of humanism, there were many who happily embraced its determination to fumigate the 'scientific' certainties of Marxism against the sentimental delusions of 'ideological' humanism. More than any other text, it was responsible for establishing the formidable credentials of 'theoretical anti-humanism', and for turning 'humanism' itself, for a couple of decades at least, into a term of sovereign condemnation.

Althusser roots his argument, which is an assault not only on humanism in general but particularly on Marxist or socialist humanism, in the writings of 'the Old Man', Marx himself. Early on in his career, he argues, in a decisive theoretical '*coupure*' or break, the young Marx parted company with the humanistic premises and pieties of the philosophical tradition on which he himself had been nurtured, the idealistic tradition of Kant, Hegel and Feuerbach, and formulated a model of history and society based not on humanistic notions of will, freedom or human potential but on

such 'structural' concepts as class, ideology and the forces and relations of production. 'In 1845', we are told,

Marx broke radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man . . . This rupture with every *philosophical* anthropology or humanism is no secondary detail; it is Marx's scientific discovery . . . The earlier idealist ('bourgeois') philosophy depended in all its domains and arguments (its 'theory of knowledge', its conception of history, its political economy, its ethics, its aesthetics, etc.) on a problematic of *human nature* (or the essence of man) . . . By rejecting the essence of man as his theoretical basis, Marx rejected the whole of this organic system of postulates.

(Althusser 1969: 227)

The 'break' identified by Althusser in Marx's early writings, and fiercely disputed by his critics, is, he insists, theoretical and philosophical, not ethical or practical. It is perfectly consistent for a 'theoretical antihumanist' to be a practical 'humanist' – to be fond of children, subscribe to Oxfam and Amnesty and help old ladies across the road. Indeed, he argues, a certain pragmatic humanism of rights and freedoms, however ideological and theoretically unsound, may be a necessary fiction in the mucky business of political organisation and struggle. Attempts by some of his opponents to represent him as a monster (a view that did not scruple to draw support from his tragic killing of his wife during a period of depressive insanity) or a covert apologist for Stalinist tyranny (Edward Thompson's position) are wide of the mark. At the same time, the tidy distinction he draws between the clinical procedures of Marxist 'science' ('theoretical practice') and the fumbling misconceptions of ideology – a very 'Cartesian' distinction for a philosopher who rejected Descartes' humanistic idealism and empiricism – invites misreading, and can too easily entail an insulting condescension towards all those movements for national, sexual, cultural or intellectual emancipation that continue to draw their

energy and define their ends from humanist ideas of liberty and self-realisation.

This presumption arises in part from too pre-emptive and simplified a notion of the 'humanist subject', the ideal 'piece of work'¹³ or paradigmatic 'man' who is enthroned at the heart of all the discourses of humanism. Of course, as Marx famously argued, the most powerful ideas in any epoch are the ideas of the powerful, and it requires no particular ingenuity to demonstrate that the essential human being tends in any period to bear a striking resemblance to the dominant group of that time and place. Michèle Barrett puts this engagingly:

Let us imagine the celebrated 'Cartesian subject'. He is made in the image of his inventor. He is white, a European; he is highly educated, he thinks and is sensitive, he can probably even think in Latin and Greek; he lived a bit too soon to be a bourgeois, but he has class confidence; he has a general confidence in his existence and power; he is not a woman, not black, not a migrant, not marginal; he is heterosexual and a father . . . It is entirely clear to us that this model of the subject is centred, and unified, around a nexus of social and biographical characteristics that represent power.

(Barrett 1991: 90)

But as Barrett argues, this parodic mannequin and his later equivalents are much more contradictory and unstable figures than the Althusserian critique of the 'humanist subject' supposes; and in any case, it is stupid and unnecessary to conclude that because they have so often secreted the lineaments and interests of a powerful minority within a generalising rhetoric of universal humanity, humanity itself is a hopelessly contaminated concept, to be thrown out with the dirty bathwater of humanist delusion.

Rejecting the historicism and humanism that imagine 'man' bestriding a history of his own making and directing it to his own ends, in favour of a theory of structural positions, causations and

transformations, Althusser's Marxism has been called 'structuralist', and its premisses located, like those of other structuralists such as the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in the psychological writings of Freud and the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Freud saw himself as an *Aufklärer*, a humanistic rationalist of the old school, dispelling error and superstition and throwing the murkiest corners of the psyche open to the sunlight of scientific reason. But his demonstration of the fragility of conscious selfhood, its enslavement to irrational drives and unformulated wishes over which it has little control, removed the philosophical supports of enlightened rationality and punctured its illusions of sovereignty. And just as psychoanalysis dethroned 'man' from the control of his own mental life, Saussurean linguistics cashiered him from command over his own speech, by showing that the sovereign 'discourse of reason', the singular utterance ('Speak, that I may see thee'¹⁴), is no more than a local manifestation of the great system of language itself, to whose metropolitan and impersonal laws it is wholly subordinate.

In this way, structuralism kicks away the twin pillars of humanism: the sovereignty of rational consciousness, and the authenticity of individual speech. I do not think, I am thought. You do not speak, you are spoken. Thought and speech, which for the humanist had been the central substance of identity, are located elsewhere, and the self is a vacancy. 'I', as the poet Rimbaud put it, 'is an other.'¹⁵

Thus, for Althusser, the 'subject' of history is not the individual human being, speaking and acting purposively in a world illuminated by rational freedom, but the impersonal 'structure in dominance' – what Marx called the 'forces and relations of production' that 'operate outside man and independent of his will', and that set the pattern and horizon of individual action. Others, though, have contended that Althusser, for all his flirtation with the vocabulary of 'structural' causation and his ascription of a structuralist *coupure*

to the mature Marx, belongs, like Marx himself, in the turbulent mainstream of continental thinking, and that his antihumanism springs not from some irreversible Copernican rupture but from the long-running family quarrel of European philosophy with itself. He has even been accused, like a latter-day Comte, of a 'metaphysical passion for a system', whose Gallic single-mindedness 'threatens to obliterate' the complex realities of twentieth-century history. In this view,

what appears disconcertingly unfamiliar or even indefinably alien . . . becomes readily intelligible and identifiable when viewed against the background of European metaphysical philosophy, from Aristotle to Kant, and Nietzsche to Heidegger.¹⁶

But in spite of Thompson's energetic polemic and the scepticism of his fellow philosophers, Althusser's reputation and influence, in Britain and Europe at least, remained formidable for two decades or more, and helped to accelerate the antihumanist turn that has coloured most subsequent discussion in the social sciences and in what some still nostalgically call 'the humanities'. Barrett notes that, for many people, 'humanism' has become 'a code word for the "impotent" and reactionary values of the bourgeois literary canon builders of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries', with the consequence that 'in some circles *it is assumed* that "humanist" is a derogatory term' (Barrett 1991: 93).

At the same time, even as its theoretical stock crashed, the *rhetorical* repertoire of humanism continued to be used without embarrassment, even by the most intransigent antihumanists. Many young British Althusserians turned out to campaign against nuclear weapons, to support the mineworkers in the strike of 1983-4, to get rid of Margaret Thatcher's poll tax in 1989 – and to justify those campaigns in the name of the hallowed rights and liberties of speech, work and representation. Althusser himself accounts

for this apparent contradiction by means of a strict distinction between *theory* (antihumanism) and *ideology* (humanism), the latter being, like the Royalists in the Civil War, ‘wrong but wromantic’; or rather, philosophically disreputable but pragmatically necessary:

it can serve as a *practical, ideological* slogan in so far as it is exactly adequate to its function and not confused with a quite different function; that there is no way in which it can abrogate the attributes of a *theoretical* concept.

(Althusser 1969: 246)

The distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘ideology’ – between, in plain terms, knowledge and error – is important, and not to be scoffingly dismissed as a piffling pedantry. Indeed, it is central to the humanist project itself, as Althusser attests in his frequent comparison of Marx with Galileo. But for most people, it remains a purely *contemplative* distinction, and I doubt whether those caught up – in southern Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America – in the struggle for national emancipation and political representation are detained by it for long.¹⁷ In any case, it is far from clear, even this late in the day, that Althusser is right to conflate humanism with Stalinism, or to relegate it to the category of serviceable delusion: a new opium of the masses for a post-Christian age.

On 28 January 1975, eight professors of philosophy at the University of Belgrade were suspended from their posts. Outside their specialised and to most people incomprehensible discipline, philosophy professors are not generally regarded as figures of much historical significance, and the event went largely unnoticed. The British press was more concerned in the days that followed with the escapades of the absconding Labour politician John Stonehouse and the challenge for the Tory leadership from an ambitious outsider called Margaret Thatcher. But for the student of humanism, the incident is of some interest.

The eight were all members of the 'Praxis group', a regular seminar of Marxist intellectuals committed to the development and dissemination of a version of Marxism that differed sharply both from the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy dominant in the Soviet imperium and its satellites and from the officially sanctioned Marxism of the ageing Tito's increasingly unstable and crisis-riven Yugoslavia. Official Marxism, grounded in the heroic triumphalism of *The Communist Manifesto* and the lapidary impersonality of *Capital*, insists on the inevitability and objectivity of the great historic forces that impel humanity towards the future. The forces and relations of production, in Marx's words, operate 'outside man and independent of his will'.¹⁸ The Praxis philosophers, in contrast, found in the earlier writings of Marx, and particularly in the recently translated 'Paris Manuscripts' of 1844, the possibility of a Marxism rooted not in the impersonal dynamics of class or social system but in a still unrealised conviction of human potentiality, agency and need. In their debates in the mid-sixties, the historian of the group has written, 'the view prevailed that the central category of Marx's philosophy was free, human, creative activity', and the problem for a socialist society they defined as 'how to realize human nature by producing a more humane world' (Markovic 1975: 23, 31). The analysis of alienation, the separation of human life from its own essential humanity, becomes 'the basic task of philosophy', and the problem for Marxists is

to reconcile the principle of determinism, according to which historical processes are governed by laws independent of human consciousness and will, with the principle of freedom according to which it is men who make their own history.

(ibid.: 18-19)

As a theoretical issue, the problem of reconciling historical necessity with human freedom remains unresolved. As a practical matter, at that time and place, the attempt to arbitrate it on 'the common ground of Marxist humanism' was almost certainly bound

to fail. The socialist humanism of the Praxis group, which flourished briefly between 1964 and its enforced dismantlement in 1975, has a specially poignant significance in the brief and tragic history of the Yugoslav Republic, which for many European socialists, dismayed by the brutal posturings of cold-war super-states, seemed for a fugitive moment to hold out the hope of a 'communism with a human face'. Holding a precarious balance, as one of the group has written, between 'right-wing nationalists (especially in Croatia) and pro-Stalinist hardliners (especially in Serbia)' (Markovic 1975: 28), it must strike us in retrospect as pitifully vulnerable, doomed to be trampled heedlessly by the very historical forces it had sought to comprehend and humanise.

By the time its flame flickered briefly in the gathering darkness of Yugoslav repression, 'socialist humanism' had already served for two decades to rally dissident Marxists, within and outside the communist and socialist parties of eastern and western Europe. The historian Edward Thompson, who in 1957 founded and co-edited the *New Reasoner* ('A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Humanism'), calls it 'the motto of the Communist libertarian opposition in 1956' (the year in which the Soviet leadership for the first time criticised the Stalinist 'cult of personality', and sent Red Army tanks to put down the Hungarian uprising), and recalls that

it arose simultaneously in a hundred places, and on ten thousand lips. It was voiced by poets in Poland, Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia; by factory delegates in Budapest; by Communist militants at the eighth plenum of the Polish Party; by a Communist premier (Imre Nagy), who was murdered for his pains. It was on the lips of women and men coming out of gaol and of the relatives and friends of those who never came out.

(Thompson 1978: 322)

Thompson's eloquent and impassioned testimony to this movement is occasioned by his angry rebuttal of Althusser's

‘theoretical anti-humanism’. He associates it particularly with ‘the generation of the anti-fascist struggle and the Resistance’, the generation of socialists that, to quote Thompson again,

cut its teeth on the causes of Spain and of Indian independence, chewed on a World War . . . and has been offered an international diet ever since – Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, the Peace Movement and the Korean War, and thence to ‘1956’, Suez, Cyprus, Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, Chile.

(*ibid.*: iii)

This is also the generation that, in Britain, voted a Labour government into power in 1945; and their children, the ‘angry young men’ (and women) who rejected the servile complacencies and stale pieties of post-war respectability, and found a public voice in the writing of young socialists and humanists like John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney and Edward Bond; the generation whose sleeping and waking nightmares were haunted by those malignant icons of twentieth-century inhumanity, the Concentration Camp and the Bomb. Bond, in particular, articulates a humanistic socialism that evokes, in its confident generalisation of the human and its unshaken faith in the power of progressive reason, the universalising discourse of enlightenment:

An artist cannot create art, cannot demonstrate his objective truth, in the service of reaction or fascism; because art is not merely the discovery of new truth or new aspects of old truth – but also the demonstration of the human need for the rational . . . Art isn’t the discovery of particular truths in the way science is; it also demonstrates the practical working out of the human need for truth.¹⁹

The ‘need for the rational’ is fundamental – biological – for Bond; and its struggle to emancipate itself, which is the true subject of all authentic art, is history, a concept endowed with a positively Hegelian purposiveness and rationality:

this is the reason that our understanding of the art of the past is often better than artists' contemporaries. The truth of art may be described as 'viability'. Tyranny and injustice aren't 'viable'; they can be lived with but not expressed with consent and approval in art – that is, made normative. Viable in this context means expressing the rationality of history.

(*ibid.*: xvii)

The unabashed historicism and rationalism of this, written in 1978, is a useful caution against attributing too wide an influence to the ideas of Althusser and his British enthusiasts, since Bond is clearly quite untouched by – or indifferent to – the fulminations of theoretical antihumanism. As so often before, the appeal to the 'human need for truth' invokes the familiar Greek model ('Greek artists wrote about men and society as objectively as they could: that is, they wrote rationally'); but although Bond, a post-war Marxist who quotes Adorno's embargo on poetry after Auschwitz, is well aware of the dangers that lurk within the 'dialectic of enlightenment' – his socialism offers not a coercive 'plan of the future', rather a '*method of change*' (*ibid.*: 11) – his rational meliorism betrays few misgivings about the humanist project itself. He has written with uninhibited eloquence against apartheid, nuclear weapons, the British occupation of the Northern Ireland and (in *Lear*, his finest play) Stalinist tyranny, and has a strong claim to have produced the most impressive body of work inspired by Marxist humanism since the poet and designer William Morris, author of the socialist utopia *News From Nowhere* (1891).

And yet, as Thompson (whose first book was a fine study of Morris) himself acknowledges, 'socialist humanism', mobilised in 1956 as 'the voice of a Communist opposition, of a total critique of Stalinist practice and theory', has a complex and ambiguous lineage of its own. For Stalinism had itself already laid claim to the term: borrowing the title of a famous essay by Maxim Gorky, Soviet communism would be a 'proletarian humanism', at once the fulfilment and the transcendence of the

humanist project. Writing from Moscow in 1936, and addressing the socialist and communist parties of the European 'Popular Front' as well as the ideological constabulary of Soviet cultural orthodoxy, the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács had already contrasted the contemplative, nonpolitical liberalism of Stefan Zweig, whose study of the fifteenth-century Dutch humanist Erasmus 'emptied humanism of all revolutionary-democratic content and therewith degraded it to a wearisome, bourgeois and liberal respectability' (Lukács 1969: 320), with the 'humanist protest' of western intellectuals against the 'imperialist barbarism' of German and Italian fascism, as evidenced in the novels of Lion Feuchtwanger, Thomas Mann and his brother Heinrich, and the French socialist Romain Rolland, and looked forward to a renaissance of popular historical fiction under the banner of 'democratic humanism', a development in which 'of course the model of the Soviet Union plays a big part' (ibid.: 318). 'A living form of humanism', as he wrote on another occasion,

prepares [readers] to endorse the political slogans of the Popular Front and to comprehend its political humanism. Through the mediation of realist literature the soul of the masses is made receptive for an understanding of the great, progressive and democratic epochs of human history.

(Lukács 1971: 156-7)

Lukács, a classically-educated German-speaker deeply imbued with the values of nineteenth-century *Bildung*, whose private opinion of Stalin's Russia is betrayed by his barely-lukewarm enthusiasm for the achievements of 'socialist realism' and his coded 'Aesopian' critique of Stalinist orthodoxy, stopped short of calling Soviet communism a 'revolutionary humanism', a phrase he reserved for the popular movements of the nineteenth century. Indeed, his warning, directed to his Russian as much as his western readers, that 'any Utopian anticipation of the future, any transformation of

the future into a supposed reality can very easily cause a slipping-back into the style of the period of decline' (Lukács 1969: 422) comes as close as was possible to identifying Stalinism with the philistine military autocracy of Bismarck's Germany. But most of Lukács' fellow apparatchiks were not sophisticated readers, and his carefully-worded assertion that 'a new historical novel, born of the popular and democratic spirit of our time' is now a possibility 'not only for the writers of the Soviet Union, but also for the humanists of the anti-Fascist popular front' (ibid.: 420) could easily be read – was perhaps intended to be read – as a proclamation of uncritical solidarity.

These equivocations were costly, and Lukács – in whose defence it can at least be pleaded that they were the price of survival – was very far from being the only western intellectual to give his imprimatur to the idea that the Soviet Union had at last consummated the humanist dream of universal rational freedom. In 1960, back in Budapest and reprinting *The Historical Novel* for a western readership (the original 1937 edition had been in Russian), he was prepared to admit (in German) that 'my political perspective of the time proved too optimistic' (an elegantly noncommittal way to acknowledge the show-trials and assassinations of political opponents, and the liquidation of millions of obstinate peasants and dissident intellectuals), but continued to insist, with the Soviet invasion of Hungary still fresh in memory, that 'this in no way alters the significance of the theoretical questions raised and the direction in which their solution is to be sought' (Lukács 1969: 10).

Similar equivocations characterise the thinking of Lukács' Russian contemporaries in the decade following Stalin's death in 1952. While conceding, with perhaps a touch of understatement, that 'the conditions created by the cult of Stalin's personality inevitably affected the theoretical elaboration of the problems of humanism in the USSR' (Petrosyan 1972: 12), one representative missal of Soviet orthodoxy declared (in 1964) that

Humanism pervades the *entire* spiritual world of Soviet man, is its essence and is expressed in morality, moral goals, devotion to communism, understanding of man's purpose, the meaning of life, happiness and duty, in the sense of moral responsibility towards the people and mankind, in comradely mutual assistance, internationalism, and implacable hostility towards the enemies of communism, peace and the freedom of the peoples.

(*ibid.*: 286)

What this liturgy of banalities demonstrates is that Belgrade 1975, like the far bloodier confrontations of Prague 1968 and Budapest 1956, was no simple morality play, a courageous few raising the humanist standard against the armed inhumanity of Stalinist hegemony. The obdurances and compromises of socialist humanism leave no room for complacency or naïveté. Like Lukács and Petrosyan (and indeed Stalin himself), the university authorities were good humanists too, though they wore their humanism at a different angle from their colleagues in the philosophy faculty. What was at issue, as always – and the consequences for poor, doomed Yugoslavia were grave – was a contest of humanisms, a struggle – ‘which is to be master – that’s all’ – for the ownership and definition of the word.

THE DEATH OF MAN

If Althusser's essays helped to dislodge the tenacious hold of humanist, assumptions about the autonomy and integrity of the individual, and to establish the idea of human beings not as free agents but as points of contingency for the impersonal historical forces of class struggle and ideology, the antihumanist turn is seen at its most radical in the work of his compatriot Michel Foucault. For not only does Althusser concede that the language of human individuality and solidarity must indefinitely retain at least a pragmatic

efficacy; his own writing, for all its theoretical severity, serves frankly humanist ends of enlightenment and emancipation. For Foucault, not only is humanism a limited and outmoded philosophy; its central conception of 'man' – now exposed as never much more, in any case, than a grammatical convenience – is due for the scrapyard.

One thing in any case is certain: man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area – European culture since the sixteenth century – one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it . . . As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.

(Foucault 1970: 386-7)

This is from the closing pages of *The Order of Things* (*Les mots et les choses*), his first book – in fact his boldly unconventional doctoral thesis; and his subsequent writings develop the critique of the concept 'man' through a deconstructive archaeology of the dominant 'discourses' within which its authority was constructed: the psychiatric discourse of the 'mad' and the 'sane', the penological discourse of the 'criminal', above all the discourse of sexual normality and deviance. *Discourse* for Foucault is what the relations of production are for Marx, the unconscious for Freud, the impersonal laws of language for Saussure, ideology for Althusser: the capillary structure of social cohesion and conformity. It situates us as individuals, and silently legislates the boundaries of what is possible for us to think and say. Above all, it is normative: not because transgression and dissent are impossible (he is less interested in coercion and prohibition than in 'liberal' modes of regulation like psychiatry, open prisons, sexual 'permissiveness') but because they too are 'grammatical', already anticipated and positioned in the hegemonic syntax of discursive power.

Foucault acknowledged the inspiration of Nietzsche, more radical in his view than either Marx or Freud. Following his mentor (all of whose work, he remarked, was no more than 'the exegesis of a few Greek words' (1970: 298)), his later writings on sexuality took him to hellenic antiquity.²⁰ But his major work was on the archaeology of the modern, the life-span of post-Renaissance 'man', a figure first fully articulated in the writings of 'enlightened' eighteenth-century freethinkers and *philosophes* like Hume, Kant and Diderot, and whose origins are to be found not in ancient Greece but in the fifteenth-century Italian cities about which Burckhardt and Symonds wrote, and on whose behalf they constructed a historical narrative of tremendous scope and energy, a story of ancient continuities lost and found again, of Promethean feats of discovery and conquest, of an infant humanism that could not yet speak its name.

3

HUMANISTS BEFORE HUMANISM: THE RENAISSANCE

What a piece of work is a man!

(*Hamlet*, II,ii)

For their Victorian enthusiasts, the early humanists were travellers: adventurers as fearless in their explorations of the intellectual world as their seafaring contemporaries were in the discovery of the physical one. Symonds called the Florentine scholar-poet Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) ‘the Columbus of a new spiritual hemisphere, the discoverer of modern culture’ (1898: 62). Walter Pater described the Renaissance as ‘that movement in which, in various ways, the human mind wins for itself a new kingdom of feeling and sensation and thought’ (1873: 54). This is the language of conquest and empire, conscripting the earlier humanists to the commercial, scientific and imperial expansionism of the later nineteenth century.

Most of the early humanists, in contrast, saw their task not as the *discovery* of the future but as the *recovery* of the past. Although it

was inspired by, and refers directly to, the transatlantic voyages of the Florentine adventurer Amerigo Vespucci, what is interesting about Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516–17) is how un-futuristic it all seems, its peaceful, equitable community combining a monastic simplicity of life with the imagined tranquility of a long-forgotten golden age. When Christopher Marlowe's humanistic Doctor Faustus boasts that he has 'made blind Homer sing to me' (Marlowe 1969: 285), it is a gesture not of revolutionary iconoclasm but of poignant archaeological homage and reversionary longing, harnessing the ancient arts of magic – the Cabbala, the occult texts of the legendary Egyptian magus Hermes Trismegistus – to raise the slumbering spirit of the founding patriarch of European poetry. Petrarch, who thought of himself as a kind of reincarnation of the Roman philosopher-statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero, expressed his feelings about the 'modern culture' whose discovery Symonds burdens him with by dressing in private in a senatorial toga and conversing in Latin – not the degenerate dog-Latin of the monks, but the pure idiom of his beloved Cicero. 'What is it to be a Florentine,' asked his friend Coluccio Salutati, 'except to be both by nature and law, a Roman citizen?' (Dickens 1972: 14). And in one of his private letters, Niccolo Machiavelli describes how, after a day working in the fields of his Tuscan farm,

On the coming of evening, I return to my home and enter my study; and at the door I take off the day's clothing, covered with mud and dust, and put on garments regal and courtly; and reclathed appropriately, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them with affection, I feed on that food which only is mine and which I was born for, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reasons for their actions; and they in their kindness [*umanità*] answer me; and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, I am not frightened by death; entirely I give myself over to them.

(Machiavelli 1961:142)

In a more – and more literally – pedestrian sense, however, the humanists of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries *were* travellers. Early humanism was not, in the sense that later ‘isms’ like socialism or pacifism or feminism are, a ‘movement’ – indeed, it was not, before the nineteenth century, an ‘ism’ at all; but it was certainly *in* movement, created and disseminated by people on the move. From the Byzantine Greek Manolis Chrysoloras, who began to teach his native language to the children of Florentine merchants in 1397, to the English poet John Milton, whose humanist interests were ripened by his travels in France and Italy in 1638–9, the itinerant *umanisti* and their patrons, students and enthusiasts formed a peripatetic and informal network of personal contact and correspondence which conveyed ideas, languages and (most importantly) books to schools, universities, private collections and solitary scholars across the European continent and its islands. Humanist writing in the period conveys the pleasures and discomforts of travel, by boat, on foot, on horseback, no less than the excitements of intellectual discovery – the discomforts especially, as evoked in Thomas More’s description of his friend Erasmus trudging

through dense forest and wild woodland, over rugged hilltops and steep mountains, along roads beset with bandits . . . tattered by the winds, spattered with mud, travel-weary, worn out by hardships.

(More 1961: 137)

Along the principal land and sea routes between northern and mediterranean Europe, loose genealogies of humanist collaboration can be traced across two centuries and more. The ten-year-old Milton learnt Latin, Greek and Hebrew under Alexander Gill at St Paul’s School, within a curriculum substantially unchanged since its principles had been laid down a hundred years earlier by the school’s founder John Colet, who, like the school’s first headmaster William Lily, author of a famous Latin *Grammar* that was still in use in

Milton's day, had studied in Florence and Rome in the early 1490s. Colet's pioneering lectures at Oxford University in the later 1490s on the Epistles of St Paul drew on the discoveries of his Dutch friend Desiderius Erasmus, who had studied Greek and the editing of ancient authors with the great printer Aldo Manuzio in Venice, developing the work of the peripatetic Roman scholar Lorenzo Valla in applying the linguistic and critical skills of humanist scholarship to the text of the New Testament – skills which Valla had himself acquired from Florentine Greeks in the 1430s.

On occasion, as the example of St Paul's indicates, this informal network of peregrine intellectuals could precipitate itself, with help from a powerful patron, into an institution. By the middle of the sixteenth century, schools or colleges teaching Greek, Latin and Hebrew (hence sometimes called 'trilingual') within a humanist curriculum had been established in London (Westminster as well as St Paul's), Oxford (Corpus Christi College), Cambridge (St Johns College), Birmingham (King Edward's School), Ipswich (Thomas Wolsey's Cardinal College), Strasbourg (the Gymnasium), Paris (the Collège de France) and Bordeaux (the Collège de Guyenne), along with new universities or colleges at Alcalá, Vienna, Wittenberg and Louvain, and, doubtless, large numbers of small private schools of the kind that Milton himself set up on his return to England in 1639. But in general the relations between the majority of *umanisti*, and their position within the major institutions of intellectual authority, remained fluid and often precarious. And just as 'humanism' has no consistent meaning (indeed, no linguistic existence) in the period, so the humanists – teachers, scholars, patrons, publishers or wealthy amateurs of the 'new learning' – had no common programme of interests or objectives. Indeed, whether because of the transient insecurity of their lives, the formidable power of the political and religious institutions with which they often found themselves in conflict, or the critical and contentious character of the humanist inclination itself, the relations between leading humanists were notable

as much for their acrimonious fallings out as for their lasting friendships. But still, friendship – rather than allegiance to a shared ideological or intellectual programme – remains, then and later, the ideal humanist relationship, finding its model in the private letters and the *De amicitia* of Cicero (and, sometimes, in the homoerotic subculture of the Platonic dialogues), and its practical embodiment in the argumentative hospitality of the ‘sodality’, a sort of hostel-cum-debating society where a travelling scholar could find a bed, a meal and congenial company for a week or two.

HUMANIST PRINTING

Even more than schools, universities and casual sodalities, though, the key humanist institution is the printing shop. Without the invention of movable type and the establishment of independent printing houses, the new learning, its key texts available only in laborious, expensive and inaccurate manuscript copies, would have remained the preserve of the wealthy patron, the scholarly specialist and above all the Church. Where manuscript is slow, costly and – since most copyists were monks – monopolised by the Church and the universities, print is fast, cheap and widely available. The great manuscript libraries were aristocratic or clerical. Book collectors were, on the whole, middle-class and lay.

The revolutionary implications of movable type were obvious from the outset. Perhaps through a confusion between the fifteenth-century printer and entrepreneur Johann Fust and the celebrated magician Georg Faust, the tradition developed that printing was the invention of the devil. Milton compared it to the dragon’s teeth from which Cadmus, founder of Thebes and inventor of the alphabet, raised an army from the barren soil (Milton 1990: 578). ‘Thanks to printed letters,’ wrote Rousseau, ‘the dangerous daydreams of a Hobbes and a Spinoza will last for ever’ (Smeed 1975: 49). The leading fifteenth- and sixteenth-century humanist printers, generally known by the Latin form of their names that

appeared on their title pages, were also publishers, booksellers and scholars, and above all entrepreneurs with a commercial as well as a cultural interest in the widest possible distribution of books; and they presided in turn over a workforce of compositors, proof-readers, binders, illustrators, editors and commentators every one of whom needed to be a proficient reader not only of their mother tongue but of Latin, Greek and probably Hebrew. The leading print-shops were in effect mini-polytechnics of humanist knowledge, offering instruction in practical skills – type design and composition, textual collation and editing – as well as first-hand contact with the literature of mediterranean antiquity. The doyen of humanist printer-publishers, the Venetian Teobaldo Manuzio (Aldus Manutius), whose Cretan type-founders produced the first Greek and italic fonts (the latter said to have been modelled on Petrarch's handwriting), employed the young Erasmus and the French humanist Guillaume Budé in this way at his famous Aldine press in Venice. François Rabelais worked in the Lyon printshop of the expatriate German Sebastian Gryphius. The Estienne (Stephanus) brothers, Robert and Henri, offered similar opportunities to aspiring scholars in Paris and Geneva.

But the expansion and influence of printing in the later fifteenth century went far beyond the handful of big names (Aldus, Gryphius, the Stephani, Henry Frobenius in Basle, Christopher Plantin in Antwerp). The scale and speed of the revolution can be gauged by the fact that by 1500, less than half a century after Gutenberg started printing in Mainz and only twenty-five years after Caxton set up his first press in Bruges, there were fifty printshops in Lyon alone, with a comparable expansion in every sizeable town in continental Europe: not only the great metropolises of political and ecclesiastical power, but the commercial centres and major crossroads of international trade like Augsburg, Rouen, Parma, Lüneburg and Antwerp.

ELOQUENCE AND IDENTITY

The *humanità* of Machiavelli's ancient companions, the generosity with which, conjured by the necromancy of the printed page, their voices respond to the urgent probings of the modern Florentine, is inseparable from the language in which those voices speak. For humanism, at this time, is above all a question of language, and the oddly ambivalent antiquarianism of these pioneers of the old emerges most clearly in their highly equivocal attitude towards the vernacular languages of their own time. Machiavelli's letter, like the books which made him famous, or infamous, *The Prince* and the *Discourses* on the works of the Roman historian Titus Livius, is written in Italian. So are the *Rime* ('rhymes'), the three-hundred-odd sonnets and canzoni that made Petrarch one of the most influential figures in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writing. In this, they both follow the example of their fellow-Florentine Dante Alighieri, whose *Divine Comedy* is the first major European poem in a modern language, and who in *De vulgari eloquentia*, a Latin treatise arguing for the creation of a vernacular literature, urges poets to honour the ancients not by using their language but by doing what they did, developing a literary idiom out of the spoken language of their own compatriots.

The wide circulation and secular accessibility of print point, too, to the advantages of vernacular literacy. Yet many early humanists viewed these opportunities with an ambivalence verging on revulsion. Not many went as far as the father of the young Michel de Montaigne, who made all the farmhands and domestics on his estate learn Latin so that the boy should have no need to descend to the vulgarity of French (in later life, Montaigne even swore in Latin). But a certain suspicion of the vernacular, and in particular of the fluidity and hybridity of spoken language, underpins the humanist project. Dante's argument for vernacular literature had insisted that all the existing spoken vernaculars of Italy and France were worse than useless to a serious writer, and that a literary language, 'illustrious, cardinal, courtly and curial', would have to be

refined out of the base metal of everyday speech.¹ For humanists, too, the model of linguistic purity is classical Latin and Greek, and even those writers who chose or were compelled, for commercial or ideological reasons, to write in a modern language generally sought to create a literary idiom as remote as possible from contemporary speech, a kind of classical vernacular. The scholarly printer Henri Estienne (Henricus Stephanus) argued in his *Traité de la conformité du langage français avec le grec* (1564) that French was the purest of all modern languages because it was the closest to ancient Greek; and Edmund Spenser, who deplored the mongrelised English of his time as ‘a gallimaufrey or hodgepodge of al other speches’,² devised for his own *Shepherds Calendar* (1573) a learned and pseudo-archaic idiom intended to evoke the language of Chaucer, the ‘English Homer’, and behind him the classical Latin of Virgil’s *Eclogues*.

Above all, early humanism is a question of language because of its central preoccupation with *eloquence*. The word means ‘speaking out’, and encompasses, certainly, the sort of thing we mean by ‘public speaking’ – the oratorical skills of the preacher or politician, advocate or entertainer. The humanist curriculum placed much emphasis on such skills, viewing knowledge as inert and occluded until shared and tested in the common medium of written or spoken debate. But eloquence has a deeper and more intimate relation to the humanist conception of self. If, as was often said, man is the speaking animal, then we exist most fully not in the intimate interiority of private thought and feeling but in the communality of linguistic exchange. ‘Language most shows a man’, wrote Ben Jonson, in a vivid phrase borrowed from the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives: ‘Speak, that I may see thee’ (Jonson 1975: 435). Indeed, the very notion of a ‘private self’, so fundamental to romantic and later conceptions of identity, is alien to early humanist thinking. The human being is fashioned and defined in language, and belongs inseparably, in its public and private aspects alike, to the medium of discourse.

In truth, though, simple oppositions like public and private, objective and subjective, form and content, won't take us very far in this context. Nothing, for example, could be more 'public', more impersonal, than printing: the mechanised manufacture of large numbers of identical commodities for profitable sale to a 'reading public' whose individual identities are a matter of complete indifference to the writers and other producers of those objects. Yet in the production of those commodities, and even more in their silent and solitary consumption, quite unprecedented depths and ardours of privacy, of intimate colloquy and self-communing inwardness are disclosed. The complex web of relations between writers, readers and characters, so potently charged with subjective warmth and fantasy, is wholly contingent upon an economy of cold commercial exchange whose principal agents – printer, compositor, bookseller – remain virtually nameless and invisible.

Even so, dependent though it is upon the anonymity and mechanical objectivity of print and the silent interiority of private reading, early humanism is all talk: voluble, intimate, opinionated. Like its own favourite reading-matter, the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon, the letters of Cicero and the satires of Horace, humanist discourse dissolves writing itself into the relaxed conviviality of conversation. Its eloquence, even at its most formal, is always transitive: it intends to persuade, bully, cajole or impress someone in particular. It discovers, in the heat of argumentative and didactic eloquence and the cool manipulations of movable type, fresh configurations of subjectivity, new ways of thinking and feeling the self.

Take two of the most famous and influential of humanist texts. In the first of these, an English lawyer, visiting Antwerp on political business, is introduced by a Flemish friend to a Portuguese traveller, recently returned from the East Indies. The three retire to the Englishman's lodgings, where they sit in the garden while the traveller describes the inhabitants and curious customs of a previously

unknown island he has discovered on his travels. In the evening they part, promising to resume their conversation on another occasion.

This bald summary is not, of course, intended to give any impression of the substantial content of Thomas More's *Utopia*, published (in Latin) in 1516; but it does serve to bring out the most striking formal feature of humanist writing – its devotion to dialogue. Plato is the major model – especially, for More, the *Republic* and the *Laws*; but humanist dialogue is more contentious and open-ended than its Platonic counterpart, lacking the authoritative Socratic voice, and counterpointing seriousness and eloquent intensity with deflationary turns of irony, scepticism and humour. The traveller Hythlodæus' account of the peaceable communistic society of the Utopians, where 'no men are poor, no men are beggars, and though no man owns anything, everyone is rich', like his impassioned denunciation of contemporary society as 'nothing but a conspiracy of the rich, who are fattening up their own interests under the name and title of the commonwealth' (More 1989: 107–8), is framed and ironised by the polite scepticism of his companion, the fictional (but authorial) 'Morus', a scepticism he shares with the reader but not with the utopian enthusiast himself, who, he sees,

was tired with talking, and I was not sure he could take contradiction in these matters, particularly when I recalled what he had said about certain counsellors who were afraid they might not appear knowing enough unless they found something to criticise in other men's ideas. So with praise for the Utopian way of life and his account of it, I took him by the hand and led him in to supper.

(More 1989: 110)

The demands of hospitality may conflict with those of absolute honesty, and friendship requires an urbane dissimulation. The controversial humanist must admit the dangers of controversy.

The overlapping ironies have divided readers ever since, and this most famous example of the genre which has borrowed its title has been hijacked by quite incompatible critical and ideological persuasions, having been claimed as a blueprint for communism, for social-democratic reformism, for neo-medievalist conservatism, and as a satire on all political idealisms.³ Where, such readers ask, is More himself in his text? Is he the idealist Hythlodæus, the principal speaker, with his savage critique of early capitalism and Tudor *Realpolitik*? Or the sceptical Morus, to whom he has given his own name, and who finds ‘quite a few of the laws and customs he had described as existing among the Utopians . . . really absurd’ (More 1989: 110)? Or is he – the classic trope of the beleaguered liberal – somewhere between the two? The text’s most recent editors read it as the expression of a ‘divided, complex mind – capable of seeing more than one side of a question and reluctant to make a definite commitment to any single position’ (ibid.: xxi). But it may be more helpful to see in the book’s famous ironies and discontinuities evidence not of authorial uncertainty or agnosticism but rather of the indefatigable openness of the dialogical mode itself, within which the anxiety for certainty and closure is constantly frustrated by the tantalising provisionality of humanist debate. There is always something more to be said, and no speaker enjoys the privilege of the last word:

So with praise for the Utopian way of life and his account of it, I took him by the hand and led him in to supper. But first I said that we would find some other time for thinking of these matters more deeply, and for talking them over in more detail. And I still hope such an opportunity will present itself some day.

(ibid.: 110)

In my second of these characteristic and influential texts, some members of a papal entourage, a few years later and a thousand miles or so to the south of Antwerp, have decided, on their way

home from a successful mission to Mantua, to break their journey for a few days at the court of Urbino, where they can spend their evenings discussing love, war and other matters with the learned, hospitable Duchess and her friends. Like *Utopia*, Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier* (*Il Cortegiano*, 1528) weaves a fictional dialogue around actual people and events. Once again the primary model is Platonic, in this case the discussion of love in the *Symposium*. Like More's book, too, it has its genial ironies and unexpected turns. In the fourth book, the philosopher Pietro Bembo's rhapsodic invocation to love bursts the ripe grape of neoplatonic eloquence, dissolving its passionate earnestness into laughter:

When Bembo had hetherto spoken with such vehemencie, that a man woulde have thought him (as it were) ravished and beside himselfe, hee stood still without once moving, holding his eyes towarde heaven as astonied: when the Ladie Emilia, which together with the rest gave most diligent eare to this talke, tooke him by the plaite of his garment, and plucking him a little said.

Take heede (maister Peter) that these thoughts make not your soule also to forsake the bodie.

Madam, answered maister Peter, it should not be the first miracle that love hath wrought in me.

(Castiglione 1928: 322)

Here again, the reversion from rapt monologue to humorous dialogue reopens issues: in this case, the question of gender, calling into debate the claimed universality of the Christian-platonist discourse of love, and disclosing its underlying misogyny.

Surely, quoth the Dutchesse, if the not yong Courtier be such a one, that he can follow this way which you have shewed him, of right he ought to be satisfied with so great a happinesse, and not to envie the yonger.

Then the Lord Cesar Gonzaga, the way (quoth he) that leadeth to this happinesse is so steepe (in my mind) that (I believe) it will be much adoe to get to it.

The Lord Gaspar saide: I believe it be hard to get up for men, but unpossible for women.

The Ladie Emilia laughed and saide: if ye fall so often to offend us, I promise you, ye shall be no more forgiven.

(ibid.: 322–3)

And here again, too, the debate ends, or rather pauses, inconclusively, with the promise of a resumption and resolution that will never come:

Whereupon they all taking their leave with reverence of the Dutchesse, departed toward their lodgings without torche, the light of the day suffising. And as they were nowe passing out of the great Chamber doore, the Lord Generall turned him to the Dutchesse, and said: Madam, to take up the variance betweene the Lord Gasper and the lord Julian, wee will assemble this night with the judge sooner than we did yesterday.

(ibid.: 423)

And there, in the half-light of an Apennine dawn in early spring, with the first stirring of a morning breeze ‘that filling the aire with a biting colde, began to quicken the tunable notes of the prettie birdes, among the hushing woodes of the hils at hand’, the dialogue ends.

Sir Thomas Hoby’s idiomatic translation of Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, published in 1561, informs a good deal of English writing in the later sixteenth century. It gave wide currency to the eroticised neoplatonic spirituality of Bembo’s rhapsody, and helped to establish, in the figure of the ideal courtier, a particular humanist model of conduct, characterised by the quality that Castiglione calls *sprezzatura*. Later commentators have sentimentalised this concept, taking it to mean something like ‘easy

gracefulness'; but the root-word *sprezzare* means to despise, and Hoby's 'recklessness', with its implication of stylish indifference to danger, difficulty or conventional opinion, may be closer to the studied insouciance, the coolly disdainful virtuosity of 'the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword':⁴

But I, imagining with my selfe often times how this grace commeth, leaving apart such as have it from above, finde one rule that is most generall, which in this part (me thinke) taketh place in all things belonging to a man in word or deede, above all other. And that is to eschue as much as a man may, and as a sharpe and daungerous rocke, too much curiousnesse, and (to speake a new word) to use in everye thing a certain disgracing to cover arte withall, and seeme whatsoever he doth and saith, to doe it without paine, and (as it were) not minding it. . . . This vertue therefore contrarie to curiositie, which we for this time terme Recklesnesse, beside that it is the true fountaine from the which all grace springeth, it bringeth with it also an other ornament, which accompanying any deede that a man doth, how litle so ever it be, doth not onely by and by open the knowledge of him that doth it, but also many times maketh it to bee esteemed much more in effect than it is.

(Castiglione 1928: 45–9)

The distinction between action and contemplation, or, commonly, the tripartite schema of action, contemplation and passion, is pivotal to humanist conceptions of self; and it would be easy to link this reckless accomplishment with the active life, Bembo's spiritualised love of beauty with the passionate and contemplative, the pair forming together an ideal of unity and fulfilment. But there are interesting tensions. The courtier's elegantly studied recklessness is clearly, and exclusively, a masculine quality, emulative and, for all its seeming carelessness, strenuously imitative:

He therefore that will bee a good scholler, beside the practising of good thinges must evermore set all his diligence to be like his maister, and (if it were possible) chaung him selfe into him. And when hee hath had some entrie, it profiteth him much to behold sundrie men of that profession: and governing him selfe with that good judgment that must alwaies be his guide, goe about to picke out, sometime of one, and sometime of an other, sundrie matters.

(ibid.: 45)

Love, on the other hand, encompasses and values, if only metaphorically, the idea of the feminine ('beauty'). Women's voices (the Duchess Elizabeth, her wittily unconventional friend Emilia Pia) cannot be excluded from its discourse, whose meanings will always be unstable, as the sardonic interpolations of the young misogynist Gasparo Pallavicino, for whom love is not only feminine but contemptibly effeminate, make clear. Proffered as an ideal of human fullness, the humanist courtier becomes instead a figure of discord, articulating the contradictions of aristocratic masculinity.

GENDER TROUBLE

Those contradictions surface irrepressibly in humanist writing, troubling its most intimate concerns and infiltrating the very grain and fibre of its language. One of the most active humanists in England in the later sixteenth century was the London-born, Oxford-educated Italian John (Giovanni) Florio. A lexicographer (he compiled the first English-Italian dictionary), translator (of the *Essais* of the French humanist Montaigne), language teacher and minor courtier, on friendly terms with Philip Sidney, Fulke Greville, Samuel Daniel and Ben Jonson, Florio did much to popularise the idiom and intellectual culture of the Florentine academies in England; and the long final chapter of his very entertaining *Second Frutes*

(1591), a bilingual phrasebook for students of Italian, is, like book four of the *Courtier*, a nocturnal dialogue between friends ‘wherein proverbially and pleasantly discourse is held of love, and of women’. To Silvestro’s Bembo-like idealisation of love and womanly beauty, Pandolpho responds with an equally conventional – and equally humanist – misogyny, denouncing women as

the most imperfect creatures, the errorrs of nature, the fall of man, the devils bayte, the subiect of all vices, and cause, yea the very efficient cause of infinite calamities.

(Florio 1591: 173)

This is familiar stuff, drawn wholesale from a centuries-old tradition, sanctified by the Church and homespun prejudice, of antifeminist defamation. What raises the dialogue above the commonplace is Florio’s recognition that the dialectics of sex saturate not only the discourses but the very medium of humanist eloquence, language itself. Taking a hint from Pandolpho’s assertion that ‘words are Feminine, & deedes are Masculine’, Silvestro launches into an impassioned philological defence of the feminine:

but tell me in good sooth, are not vices [*il vitio*] masculine, and virtues [*la virtù*] feminine? are not the Muses the loue of the learned? and do not Gentlemen follow the graces? not because Muses, nor because graces, but because women. There is but one Fenix in the world, and she a Female . . . Doe you not see I pray you how the best creatures, & perfectest things that God hath created for the health, procreation & preseruation of all his human creatures are of the feminine kind [*del feminino genere*], & are called women? for so it hath seemed good to al philosophers, louers of learning, and searchers of sciences to name them . . . The Bible [*La Bibbia*], endited by the holy ghost, and written by the prophets, patriarks, Euangelists, & Apostles, is a woman . . . the liberall, prodigall and

vniuersall mother, and producer of all things and breathing creatures, that is to say earth [*la terra*], who with so bounteous a hand feedes all liuing things is a woman, and so are all her plants, hir spices, hir frutes, and fayrest flowers.

(Florio 1591: 179, 199–201)

This paean to the female should not of course be confused with what we would now call feminism. All the authoritative figures in it, the ‘philosophers, louers of learning, and searchers of sciences’ who name the world, the ‘prophets, patriarks, Euangelists, & Apostles’ who write its scriptures, the speakers in the dialogue, the author himself, are male. Misogyny and philogyny, hatred and idealisation of women, are equally and inseparably elements of the male discourse of eloquence, men speaking of and for women.

But the relation between them is textually unstable. The elision, typical in humanist writing, of the grammatical into the cultural-biological senses of gender, licenses a good deal of of confusion and rhetorical opportunism. Which is the true face of virtue, Silvestro’s feminised *virtù*, or Machiavelli’s sternly masculine appropriation of the same word, which some translations of *The Prince* gloss as ‘manliness’? But it also points towards contradictions and instabilities deep within the evolving idea of ‘man’, the keystone of humanism itself. In extreme cases, incompatible registers coexist manically within the same utterance, as in one of the most extraordinary of neoplatonic allegories, the *Heroic Frenzies* of Florio’s friend Giordano Bruno. In this sequence of sonnets, dedicated to the ideal courtier, soldier, scholar, Sir Philip Sidney, in which the poems, many of them on mythological subjects, are interspersed with interpretative dialogues, the language of Petrarchan idealisation decomposes before our eyes into a pathological horror and contempt:

for those eyes, for those cheeks, for that breast, for that whiteness,
for that vermilion, for that speech, for those teeth, for those lips, that
hair, that dress, that robe, that glove, that slipper, that shoe, that

reserve, that little smile, that wryness, that window-widow, that eclipsed sun, that scourge, that disgust, that stink, that tomb, that latrine, that menstruum, that carrion, that quartan ague, that excessive injury and distortion of nature, which with surface appearance, a shadow, a phantasm, a dream, a Circean enchantment put to the service of nature, deceives us as a species of beauty.⁵

For the humanist, such contradictions can be both disabling and productive. The ironic reflexiveness and combative openness of humanist discourse can license the most disconcerting lurches from the serenely cerebral into what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the 'lower bodily stratum', the realm of the obscene, the disreputable, the grotesque, of raucous laughter and scatological irreverence. Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* is the ribald antitype of the *Utopia* of his friend More, whose name (*Moriae encomium*) it punningly appropriates; and the *Gargantua and Pantagruel* of François Rabelais unleashes a devastating onslaught of obscenity and visceral mockery against the patriarchs of ecclesiastical and intellectual authority.

In a different mode, the tensions of an aspiring masculinity torn between the active and the passionate, the soldier and the lover, can generate magnificent rhetorical and dramatic energy, as in the most reckless and eloquent of Elizabethan heroes, Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great. Besieging Damascus, and about to engage in battle with the King of Arabia and his ally the Egyptian Sultan, this Mongolian superman pauses to reflect on the grief his inevitable victory will cause to the Sultan's daughter Zenocrate, with whom he is in love, and to ponder the strange, indefinable power of female beauty.

What is beauty, saith my sufferings, then?
 If all the pens that ever poets held
 Had fed the feeling of their masters' thoughts,
 And every sweetness that inspir'd their hearts,

Their minds, and muses on admired themes;
 If all the heavenly quintessence they still [distill]
 From their immortal flowers of poesy,
 Wherein, as in a mirror, we perceive
 The highest reaches of a human wit;
 If these had made one poem's period,
 And all combin'd in beauty's worthiness,
 Yet should there hover in their restless heads
 One thought, one grace, one wonder, at the least,
 Which into words no virtue can digest.

(Marlowe 1969: 167–8)

Unlike his author, Tamburlaine is not much of a reader, so we need not suspect him of whiling away his off-duty hours with a copy of Castiglione, who might almost have had his character and predicament in mind when he wrote that under the influence of beauty the courtier shall

bee out of all bitterness and wretchednesse that yong men feele (in a manner) continually, as jelousies, suspitions, disdaines, angers, desperations and certaine rages full of madnesse . . . He shall doe no wrong to the husband, father, brethren or kinsfolke of ye woman beloved.

(Castiglione 1928: 317)

But if the warrior is susceptible to the mysterious force of the feminine, he must also fear his own susceptibility as a dangerous weakness, which he struggles, in a passage of tortuously congested reasoning, to reconcile with the imperatives of manly virtue:

But how unseemly is it for my sex,
 My discipline of arms and chivalry,
 My nature, and the terror of my name,
 To harbour thoughts effeminate and faint!
 Save only that in beauty's just applause,
 With whose instinct the soul of man is touched,

And every warrior that is rapt with love
 Of fame, of valour, and of victory,
 Must needs have beauty beat on his conceits:
 I thus conceiving, and subduing both,
 That which hath stoop'd the chiefest of the gods,
 Even from the fiery-spangled veil of heaven,
 To feel the lowly warmth of shepherds' flames,
 And march in cottages of strowed reeds,
 Shall give the world to note, for all my birth,
 That virtue solely is the sum of glory,
 And fashions men with true nobility.

(Marlowe 1969: 168)

Of course Tamburlaine, described disarmingly in the list of characters as 'a Scythian shepherd', is no courtier, and in asserting an aggressive meritocracy of 'virtue' against the niceties of courtly rank he places himself outside the courtier's fastidious dilemmas of identity, and closer to the ruthless *virtù* of Machiavelli's Prince. A product of what Stephen Greenblatt calls 'self-fashioning'⁶, he owes nothing to social position or convention, and is thus free to redefine virtue as military conquest ('glory'); and if he can 'conceive' the power of love that reduced Zeus himself to the indignity of a shepherd's hovel, he can also 'subdue' it. The rhetorical virtuosity is impressive, but the strain shows in the clotted syntax and the hammering insistence on having it both ways, and the passage graphically transcribes the crisis of masculine identity that haunts the humanist project.

HUMANIST READING

The humanist is a speaker, a teacher; but the ideal subject of the humanist's discourse is a reader. Indeed, the relation between the two is fully reciprocal, for the purpose of reading is not only to learn but to return that learning to the vivid medium of speech, and so to make it, and the learner, humanly visible ('Speak, that I

may see thee'). Here again Florio is helpful, this time in his earlier primer for language learners, the *First Frutes* of 1587:

By reading, many things are learned, who wil haue good counsel, let him reade, who wil see, and heare strange things, let him reade: by reding, we haue good forwarning, by reading, we learne to knowe the good from the bad, vertue from vice, & as the bee takes from one hearb gum, from another waxe, & from another hony, so by reading diuers books, diuers things are learned . . . By reading wee learne to bee eloquent, and beyng eloquent, many and innumerable bee the comodities that ensue of it; Eloquence hath force to make the coward couragious, the tirant curteous & merciful: Eloquence perswadeth the good, disswadeth the bad, comforteth th' afflicted, banisheth feare from the fearful, pacifieth the insolent, and, as Cicero saith, vanquisheth cities, kingdomes, & castles with her force.

(Florio 1587: ff 52, 57)

Eloquence, in short, is the mother of Utopia, distributing 'commodities', banishing fear and ambition, pacifying kingdoms; and the mother of eloquence is reading. If speaking makes us visible, reading teaches us to speak. It is noticeable how popular the figure of the reader, especially the woman reading, becomes in domestic portraiture from the later sixteenth century. Unlike the formal portrait, there is in these pictures a striking absence of formal 'pose', self-conscious, outer-directed. The painter is absent; and the spectator is a privileged, invisible witness of a moment of pure inwardness. The reader, in silent colloquy with an unseen interlocutor, becomes the focal site of a new interiority.

What those readers in their speaking silences remind us is that at the centre of humanist activity is the book. All its values – its virtue and eloquence, its recklessness and moderation, its piety and obscenity – are textualised: grounded in texts, taught through texts, rehearsed, elaborated and disputed in texts. A text, for the humanist, is a living thing; and a living thing is nothing other than a text. When

Milton in *Areopagitica* (1644) calls a good book 'the precious life-blood of a master spirit' (Milton 1990: 578), he only reciprocates what he had written a couple of years before, that 'he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himselfe to bee a true Poem, that is a composition, and patterne of the best and honourablest things'.⁷ And that 'master spirit' indicates that, although so many of those painted readers, like so many of the subjects and addressees of humanist discourse, are women, and the activity of reading (*lettura*) is feminised, the discourse itself is a manly one, a discipline of mastery. A large amount, perhaps the bulk, of humanist reading-matter is concerned either with the acquisition and maintenance of political and social authority (*The Prince*, *The Courtier*, Thomas Elyot's *Book of the Governor* (1531), Milton's *Of Education* (1644)), or, as Lorna Hutson has shown, with the masculine 'husbandry' of the conjugal and paternal household (Hutson 1994). As so often throughout the subsequent history of the word, the decisive semantic stress (*hu-man-ism*) falls on the second syllable; and never more so than when it lays claim to an encompassing universality.

PICO AND 'RENAISSANCE HUMANISM'

It is worth repeating, though, that to talk about 'humanism' in this context, in whatever incarnation – the early Florentine or 'civic' humanism of Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni, the northern European Christian humanism of Erasmus and More, 'Latin' and 'Greek' humanisms – is a historical solecism. All are later constructions – not wrong for that reason, but grouped and periodised into tidy narratives whose logic may tell us more about the concerns of those who compose them than about the writings they compose them from. So when, for example, three of the most eminent and learned historians of the period assert confidently that

during the Italian Renaissance the term 'Humanism' denoted primarily a specific intellectual program and only incidentally suggested the more general set of values which have in recent times come to be called 'humanistic'

(Cassirer 1948: 2–3)

it takes a good deal of nerve to disagree; but it needs to be said that all statements of that kind are seriously misleading. The term 'humanism' denoted nothing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in Italy or anywhere else, for the reason that no such term existed. Nor, except in the most hopelessly generalised sense, was there any 'specific intellectual program' for it to denote, if it had existed. True, there was an informal curriculum, the *studia humanitatis* or 'study of humanity', grounded in the reading of ancient Greek and Roman authors and the application of Platonic, Aristotelean and Ciceronian ideas and values to contemporary life; and the people who taught it or wrote about it sometimes referred to themselves as *umanisti* or 'humanists', a purely functional term that conferred no particular prestige. But if that adds up to an 'intellectual program', it is one characterised by a notable absence of coherence and a remarkable degree of discord. While Petrarch and his pupil Leonardo Bruni venerated Cicero as the supreme arbiter of public conduct and private virtue, the Byzantine philosopher Joannes Argyropoulos dismissed him as a bore and a dilettante. 'Platonic' humanists like Marsilio Ficino scorned the work of their 'Aristotelean' colleagues. The Catholic humanist More paid with his life for his devotion to a Church for which his friend Erasmus had little but contempt. And if these intellectual divergences can be seen as examples of the benign *coincidentia oppositorum* or harmonious opposition of which the humanists were so fond, it has to be said that more often than not they were expressed with an aggressively personal offensiveness that scuttles any notion of companionable collegiality. So radical and uncompromising, indeed, are the

differences separating one 'humanist' from another that you begin to wonder whether that word too has any useful meaning; and it is noticeable, in fact, that historians of the period disagree quite sharply about whether some of the key figures – Petrarch, More, da Vinci, Luther, Calvin – can be called humanists at all.

A vivid example of the problems of humanist historiography is the case of the Florentine nobleman Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, author of a Latin oration 'On the Dignity of Man' which has been called 'the manifesto of Renaissance humanism' (Craven 1981). In fact the oration, intended to serve as a preface to a set of nine hundred contentious theological theses and not printed in Pico's lifetime, was not given the title by which it is generally known until some seventy years later. It consists largely of a defence, florid in style and astonishingly eclectic in its variety of literary and mythological reference, of the elevated calling of the philosopher – a debate of some importance in fifteenth-century Florence, where the rival claims of the active and the contemplative life articulated some of the central themes at issue in the political transition from citizen republic to Medicean principality and the relations between the independent city-state and the Roman Church.

But the Oration's fame, and its extraordinary prominence in later accounts of humanism, derive from the first few pages, in which the Creator of Genesis announces to the newly-formed Adam that he will stand apart from the rest of creation by virtue of the unique plasticity with which he has been endowed. Whereas all other creatures are circumscribed by the natural disposition conferred upon them, Man alone has the freedom to choose his own nature.

He therefore took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him thus: 'Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy

judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's centre that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honour, as though the maker and moulder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.'

(Cassirer 1948: 224)

This unique freedom, Adam is told, can be used 'to degenerate into the lower forms of life' or 'to be reborn into the higher forms', allegorised by Pico as the three highest orders in the Dionysian hierarchy of angels, which are taken in turn as a figure for the three-part choice of life that structures so much humanist thinking.

Let us consider what they do, what sort of life they lead. If we also come to lead that life (for we have the power), we shall then equal their good fortune. The Seraph burns with the fire of love. The Cherub glows with the splendour of intelligence. The Throne stands by the steadfastness of judgment. Therefore if, in giving ourselves over to the active life, we have after due consideration undertaken the care of the lower beings, we shall be strengthened with the firm stability of Thrones. If, unoccupied by deeds, we pass our time in the leisure of contemplation, considering the Creator in the creature and the creature in the Creator, we shall be all ablaze with Cherubic light. If we long with love for the Creator himself alone, we shall speedily flame up with His consuming fire into a Seraphic likeness.

(Cassirer 1948: 227)

The first part of the Oration, which J.A. Symonds called ‘the Epiphany of the modern spirit’, certainly reads, for all its abstruse neoplatonic allegorising and its exotic syncretism of Jewish and Christian with Greco-Roman, Zoroastrian, Chaldean and Arabic philosophies, like an eloquent exposition of many of the themes elaborated by Burckhardt and his successors: the dignity and freedom of man, individualism, wide intellectual curiosity and a refusal to submit to the constraints of clerical orthodoxy. Furthermore, Pico’s rank, as Count of Mirandola, and his lordly contempt for convention and mediocrity, seemed to suit him for the role of courtier in the Castiglione mould, while the fact that the Church suppressed his nine hundred theses as heretical and refused to allow him to dispute them publicly, as he wished, enhanced his glamour as a heroic pioneer of freethinking modernity.

In the same spirit, its influence has been detected throughout the writing of the following two centuries, confirming its status as a seminal text. When Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*, discoursing philosophically of

Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world,
And measure every wandering planet’s course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite,
And always moving as the restless spheres,

(Marlowe 1969: 133)

adds the contemplative ‘splendour of intelligence’ to the active ‘steadfastness of judgment’ he has already shown as a victorious general, he seems to stand self-created as a philosopher-prince of Mirandolan lineage. The older brother in Milton’s Ludlow *Masque* (1634) reassures his younger sibling with an account of the protean capacities of human freedom that is at the same time a defence of the effective power of ‘divine philosophy’ (Milton 1990: 75–6), while the later *Paradise Lost*, with its syncretic diversity of reference, its angelic hierarchs instructing an unfallen

Adam in the responsibilities of free will and its determination to penetrate the mystery of ‘Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rime’ (Milton 1990: 150), looks like the realisation, almost two hundred years later, of Pico’s unconsummated project.

Most frequently, perhaps, the Oration has been seen as the direct inspiration behind one of the most commonly quoted passages in Shakespeare, Hamlet’s

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!

(*Hamlet*, II, ii)

Actually, ‘most commonly *misquoted*’ might have been better, since the first words are usually rendered as ‘What a piece of work is Man’. This is how the sentence is almost always remembered conversationally, and it is often encountered in this form in print, even finding its way into a recent history of humanism by a distinguished historian of the subject (Bullock 1985: 44).

To point this out is not a piece of cheap pedantry. The apparently trivial omission of the indefinite article decisively shifts the sense, in a way that may throw light on the significance attributed by Burckhardt, Symonds and others to the Oration itself. It has already been noted that the title ‘On the Dignity of Man’, which so decisively predisposes the meaning and purpose of the Oration, was not given to it by Pico himself. His nephew Gianfrancesco, printing it for the first time in 1496, called it simply *oratio quaedam elegantissima* (‘a certain very stylish discourse’), and it was not until Frobenius’ Basle edition of 1557 that it received the Latin title by which it has since been known. The phrase ‘dignity of man’ does not occur in the text itself, and it is striking how little interest Pico shows, after the opening allegorical flourish of God’s apostrophe to Adam, in defining the properties of a generic entity called ‘Man’. In Latin, in any case, the distinction between ‘a man’ (any), ‘the man’ (particular)

and 'man' (universal) is grammatically indifferent, since the language lacks both definite and indefinite articles: the Basle title, *De hominis dignitate*, could as easily be translated 'On a man's worthiness'. The usual version, with its portentous evocation of a transcendent 'Man', belongs, like so much else of Renaissance 'humanism', not to the fifteenth century but to the nineteenth. Pico's 'very stylish discourse' was not fully translated into English until 1944, and Symonds seems to have been the first, in 1882, to give it its English title.

If Hamlet's elusive little 'a' opens up some of the problems of reading the Oration, as Burckhard, Symonds, Cassirer and others do, as the founding document of a later universalising humanism, his sardonic repudiation of his own humanist 'piece of work' (the phrase means 'masterpiece') exposes some of the other issues obscured by the rhetorical figure of universal Man.

And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though, by your smiling, you seem to say so.

(*Hamlet*, II, ii)

Shifting adroitly between two modalities of 'man' ('humanity' and 'male person'), Hamlet exposes the extent to which, unlike later humanisms, the writing of fifteenth-, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century humanists is explicitly and self-consciously entangled in the problematics of sexual difference. Machiavelli's or Ficino's masculine *virtù*, for ever on its guard against the blandishments and treacheries of female Fortune; Erasmus' sluttish Folly vaunting her female ancestry and reproductive potency, and laughing coarsely at the pretensions of male philosophers and prelates; Bruno's philosophical Actaeon destroyed by his own glimpse of virginal wisdom; Spenser's manly Guyon laying waste with puritanical relish the seductive allurements of Acrasia and her garden of earthly delights: at every point, the humanist imagination is haunted by sexual terror and desire.⁸ As Florio shows, its very language is sexually saturated,

and it would be virtually impossible, and almost certainly futile, to disentangle its allegorical figurations from the ideological commitments that they articulate. When Francis Bacon calls science *temporis partus masculus* ('the male progeny of time'), or Milton writes that 'Laws are Masculin Births', the metaphor of male parthenogenesis adumbrates a regime of knowledge and power, set out more explicitly in the former's *New Atlantis* and the latter's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, in which women, quite literally, do not figure.⁹

Far from the evasively ungendered 'universality' of Comtean humanity, the 'man' of the humanists is an embattled and uncertain construction (a 'piece of work', indeed), his aspirations to the generic inclusiveness of the human foundering on the inescapable limitations of the masculine. All Pico's eloquence cannot disguise the oddity of his opening *mythus*, an Adamic Paradise without an Eve. If his paean to the metamorphic creativity of contemplative intellect anticipates the chaste rapture of Andrew Marvell's 'Garden', in whose green shade

The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find;
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas,

(lines 43–6)

it too collapses, like the poem, into a bathetic misogyny that reveals yet again the remorseless absurdity of would-be ungendered 'man':

Such was that happy garden-state,
While man there walked without a mate . . .
But 'twas beyond a mortal's share
To wander solitary there:
Two paradises 'twere in one
To live in paradise alone.

(lines 57–64)

Marvell's witty explicitness is as refreshing as it is unusual. In Pico's case, the problematics of gender are ruthlessly suppressed in his argument, with its all-male cast of angels and patriarchal authorities, from Moses and Zoroaster to Plato and Paul, only to resurface, yet again, in his language:

For if you see one abandoned to his appetites crawling on the ground, it is a plant and not a man you see; if you see one blinded by the vain illusions of imagery, as it were of Calypso, and, softened by their gnawing allurements, delivered over to his senses, it is a beast and not a man you see.

(Cassirer 1948: 226)

And as so often in humanist writing, the crude misogyny which identifies the female (in this case the Homeric sorceress Calypso, sister to Bruno's 'Circean enchantment') with the bestiality of desire coexists without discomfort – the positive and negative poles of humanist patriarchalism – with a rapt idealism that approvingly feminises the contemplative act itself. Purified by philosophy, the soul (Latin *anima*, grammatically feminine)

shall herself be made the house of God, and to the end that as soon as she has cast out her uncleanness through moral philosophy and dialectic, adorned herself with manifold philosophy as with the splendour of a courtier, and crowned the pediments of her doors with the garlands of theology, the King of Glory may descend and, coming with his Father, make his stay with her. If she show herself worthy of so great a guest, she shall, by the boundless mercy which is his, in golden raiment like a wedding gown, and surrounded by a varied throng of sciences, receive her beautiful guest not merely as a guest but as a spouse from whom she will never be parted.

(Cassirer 1948: 232)

In the century since Symonds, Pater and Arnold wrote, one or two dissenting voices have been raised, pointing to the rhetorical

and functional character of the Oration, the incoherence and conventionality of many of its ideas, the ‘extravagance and posturing’ of its claims for philosophy, its unrepresentativeness both of Pico’s writings and of humanist thought in general.¹⁰ But these are minority views. The Burckhardian reading remains the dominant one, underpinning the proto-modernity of the Renaissance and its unbroken continuity with the present. Giving for the first time ‘a positive method and dignity’ to the ‘haphazard and superficial’ speculations of the humanists, the Oration ‘summarizes with grand simplicity and in pregnant form the whole intent of the Renaissance and its entire concept of knowledge’ (Cassirer 1948: 222), thus inaugurating a ‘humanistic religion’ which ‘signifies the beginning of the evolution which, via the Enlightenment, finds its most consistent continuation in what in recent years has been called “Humanism”’ (Gelder 1964: 7–8).

Against all this, it is worth restating the real subject of Pico’s eloquence: not ‘the dignity of man’, which is no more than an allegorical and rhetorical gambit, but the absolute compatibility and hence universality of all known investigations into ‘the causes of things, the ways of nature, the plan of the universe, the purposes of God, and the mysteries of heaven and earth’ (Cassirer 1948: 238–9). In this extraordinary enterprise, which takes to new lengths the ‘syncretic’ or synthesising passion of Platonic humanism, Hebrew and Chaldee sages jostle amicably with Pythagoras and Aristotle, the Decalogue and Gospels keep company with Orphic and Hermetic mysteries, natural magic and numerology, medieval churchmen like Scotus and Aquinas rub shoulders with Arab philosophers like Avicenna (Abu Ibn Sina) and Averroes (Abu Ibn Rushd), and all are cheerfully embraced within the generous doctrinal bosom of the Mother Church in Rome.

This shows a degree of political optimism, certainly (his enemies called it arrogance); and it is something of a tribute to the humanistic broad-mindedness of the Church that, although Pico’s offer of a public disputation was declined, only thirteen of the nine hundred

theses were thought theologically objectionable by the papal commission that examined them. But it also suggests that, in spite of his publicly-expressed contempt in his *Apologia* for their intellectual inadequacies, the Curial authorities hardly saw the theses as the work of a dangerous theological modernist, an Italian Luther or Calvin. Unorthodox as they were, most of the issues raised had been the subject of theological dispute for centuries, and the commission pointed to the truly heterodox nature of Pico's project when it condemned him not for innovation but for 'reviving several of the errors of gentile philosophers which are already disproved and obsolete' (Craven 1981: 47ff.).

I have spent some time on the Oration and its author as a way of showing how strong even now is the hold of the Burckhardtian myth of the Renaissance as the cradle of modernity, and of the humanists as the fearless cosmonauts of the future. In this view, the 'Man' of Mirandolan humanism is not, as Michel Foucault put it, 'an invention of recent date . . . perhaps nearing its end', simply one among the many historical objects of human knowledge, but a *telos*, a terminal truth towards which human reason has been striving, through the infested swamps and enchanted forests of dogma and superstition, since the dawn of history itself. Three historical tropes structure the myth and give it its seductive coherence: the *break with the past* (the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes the Renaissance as 'a complete break . . . with medieval culture'); the *return to the source* (the same article defines humanism as 'a return to the Hellenic sources of Western culture'), and *unbroken continuity with the present*.¹¹ And like all adventure stories, this one has its heroes – Petrarch, Pico, Michelangelo – and its villains (usually the Church), which perhaps helps to explain its obdurate hold on the historiographic imagination.

But while its ideological grip persists, its explanatory power is negligible. The humanists never did propose what Lisa Jardine calls 'a logic of discovery' (Jardine 1974: 14). If they used the word at all, it was only in the older sense of re-discovery, the disclosure of

things already known, though sometimes forgotten. Their beloved 'dialectic' was not the dynamically forward-driving force of Hegel and Marx but a method of teaching, where possible from the ancient texts, things already written, and of discussing them in a language inspired by the eloquence and *umanità* of the ancients. To bring this out clearly, it will be useful to compare Pico with another writer who, a century later, set out to explore what the Oration calls 'the causes of things, the ways of nature, the plan of the universe, the purposes of God, and the mysteries of heaven and earth' (Cassirer 1948: 237–8).

4

HUMANISM AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Why should we not introduce man into our work, as he has been placed in the universe? Why not make man the central focus?

(Diderot)

All questions of science are, at bottom, questions about man.

(Hume)

NATURE AND SCIENCE

In a famous passage in the *Great Instauration* (1620) that intriguingly anticipates Nietzsche's 'four errors', Francis Bacon describes the four 'Idols and false notions which are now in possession of the human understanding', and which prevent human beings from arriving at a clear understanding of the world in which they live. First, he writes, are the 'Idols of the Tribe', so called because they 'have their foundation in human nature itself, and in the tribe or race of men'. They are responsible for an innate tendency to attribute human significance to natural phenomena, populating the universe with human intelligence and desire, from the anthropoid totems

of traditional religion to the casual poetry of 'raging tempests'. Second are the 'Idols of the Cave' that govern individual temperament, predisposing each of us to find particular patterns of significance in the contingency of things; for 'every one . . . has a cave or den of his own, which refracts and discolours the light of nature'. Third are the linguistic confusions that result from the attempt to describe and classify things using ready-made vocabularies and concepts, which Bacon calls the 'Idols of the Market Place', 'on account of the commerce and consort of men there'; since 'it is by discourse that men associate; and words are imposed according to the apprehension of the vulgar'. Finally there are the 'Idols of the Theatre', the theoretical systems and explanatory narratives 'which have immigrated into men's minds from the various dogmas of philosophies', so called 'because in my judgement all the received systems are but so many stage-plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion', into which every fragment of experience, however awkward or contradictory, must be made to fit (Bacon 1905: 263–4).

Bacon has often been claimed as a humanist. Like Erasmus, he despised the formalism and traditionalism of the ancient universities. His *Essays*, addressed like so much humanist didactic to a young nobleman, are a primer of civic *umanità* such as might have been written by Ascham or Elyot. For him, as for Machiavelli, the measure of all knowledge must be, not its theoretical consistency or conformity to some ancient authority, but its practical usefulness and reliability; and he would certainly have relished the iconoclastic *chutzpah* of the French humanist Pierre de la Rame (Peter Ramus), who earned his doctorate from the University of Paris by defending the thesis that 'everything that Aristotle taught was wrong'. Bacon's ambition, expressed through the experimental philosophers of his utopian *New Atlantis*, was to open a way, through the accumulated Idols of error, habit and prejudice, to 'the Knowledge of Causes,

and Secrett Motions of Things; And the Enlarging of the bounds of Humane Empire, to the Effecting of all Things possible' (Bacon 1974: 239), a project that recalls Pico's desire to penetrate 'the causes of things, the ways of nature, the plan of the universe, the purposes of God, and the mysteries of heaven and earth'.

The truth is, however, that under the pitiless gaze of Baconian empiricism, the pretensions of the humanists wither. Bacon thinks of knowledge not, like Pico, as contemplative wisdom but as 'empire', active conquest for practical ends. 'What men want to learn from nature', writes Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 'is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and men'.¹ The human-centred world of humanist anthropology, with its elaborate correspondences of human and cosmic and its assurance that, in the words of Plato's Protagoras, 'man is the measure of all things', is exposed as no more than a tribal *folie de grandeur*. And whereas for the humanists language, Hamlet's 'discourse of reason', not only unlocks the mysteries of the cosmos but is itself numbered among them, Bacon, in a coolly revisionary reading of one of those mythological narratives in which the humanists found an image of the amorous identity of the natural and the human, asserts an absolute separation between the primary objectivity and self-sufficiency of nature and the secondary order of language through which it is labelled and classified:

it is no marvel if no loves are attributed to Pan, besides his marriage with Echo. For the world enjoys itself, and in itself all things that are . . . The world therefore can have no loves, nor any want (being content with itself), unless it be of *discourse*. Such is the nymph Echo, a thing not substantial but only a voice . . . for that is the true philosophy which echoes most faithfully the voices of the world itself, and is written as it were at the world's own dictation; being nothing else than the image and reflexion thereof, to which it adds nothing of its own, but only iterates and gives it back.

(Bacon 1905: 516–18)

To the humanists, these metamorphic myths, like language (*mythos* means ‘speech’), resemble a world which is itself a book, an incarnate speech act. Words and things share a common nature, and the imagination is permitted a glimpse of the virginal truths of reason. Bacon’s language too is saturated with erotic metaphor, charging the pursuit of knowledge with associations of seduction and sexual conquest. But unlike the despised Aristoteleans, whose feeble abstractions can only ‘catch and grasp’ at knowledge, leaving ‘Nature herself untouched and inviolate’, Bacon sets out to ‘seize or detain her’, compelling her into a ‘chaste, holy and legal wedlock’ from which the fruits of science will issue (ibid.: 12–13). This is itself a powerful myth: Genevieve Lloyd calls it ‘Bacon’s main contribution to our ways of thinking about mind’s relation to the rest of Nature’ (Lloyd 1993: 13). But his use of the story of Pan and Echo, by contrast, is purely illustrative and tactical. Nature, serenely self-absorbed, has no need of speech. Language, contemplating it from afar with a yearning that can never be consummated, is condemned to iteration and reflection.

At the same time, the Baconian challenge to (and for) intellectual authority goes far beyond the sceptical anti-Aristoteleanism of Ramus and the Florentine Platonists, the humanist inclination to treat the golden codgers of antiquity as ‘guides, not commanders’ (Jonson 1975: 379). If humanist dialectic, as Lisa Jardine has argued, is essentially conservative, the eloquent exposition of a body of already existing knowledge ‘within a textbook tradition’, Bacon offers a radical ‘logic of discovery’ (Jardine 1974: 17), a methodological will to power that threatens to dissolve all intellectual authority in its unappeasable hunger for empire:

And therefore it is fit that I publish and set forth those conjectures of mine which make hope in this matter reasonable; just as Columbus did, before that wonderful voyage of his across the Atlantic, when he gave the reasons for his conviction that new lands and continents

might be discovered besides those which were known before; which reasons, though rejected at first, were afterwards made good by experience, and were the causes and beginnings of great events.

(Bacon 1905: 287)

In this sense Bacon, or rather the 'Baconianism' that in the course of the seventeenth century was to find its concrete realisation in the materialist sociology of Thomas Hobbes and the systematic empiricism of the Royal Society, marks the historical terminus of 'Renaissance humanism'; or rather *one* of its historical termini. For if there is a paradox in the humanist Bacon serving notice of redundancy on the humanist enterprise, it is certainly no sharper than the poignancy of the even more deeply humanist Jean Calvin devising for his Genevan congregation a theocracy as absolute, and as securely grounded in secular power, as any medieval Pope could have dreamt of. In England, whose Calvinist national church was established and governed by the scholarly latinist Elizabeth Tudor, herself a pupil of the humanist Roger Ascham, Protestant intellectuals continued through the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to cultivate their humanist gardens, but only at the cost of ignoring the contradictions, always latent within the volatile compound of 'Christian humanism', between Calvin's all-powerful, all-knowing deity, in whose mind every sinful human destiny awaits its preordained comeuppance, and the humanist dream of self-determination; contradictions that make themselves felt everywhere in the writings of Protestant humanists like Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, John Donne and John Milton.

HUMANISM AND RELIGION

Each of those, and many others, could provide material for a chapter. The 'bate' or conflict that the protagonist of Sidney's sonnet-sequence *Astrophil and Stella* feels between his 'will', his

shameful desire for the unattainable Stella, and his 'wit', his intellectual and moral understanding, echoes the painful paradoxes of the same writer's *Apology for Poetry*, in which poetry torments the 'erected wit' of the aspiring humanist with glimpses of a distant perfection from which the 'infected will' is forever exiled.² For the wealthy and cosmopolitan Sidney, who seemed to some contemporaries the embodiment of Castiglionean courtliness, these antinomies may have been a clever game, though the writing hints otherwise. In Spenser, materially dependent and thus ideologically constrained in ways unnecessary for his patrician friend and patron, the effort to reconcile a Calvinist sense of worthlessness with a humanist commitment to classical beauty and eloquence troubles the writing with a profound unease, and there are few things in the poetry of the period as revealing as the passage in the second book of his ruined allegorical epic, *The Faerie Queene*, in which the idyllically hedonistic Bower of Bliss, whose iridescent detail testifies to the breadth of Spenser's reading in the canon of humanist pleasure, is laid waste, in a frenzy of grim self-mortification, by the Calvinist hero Sir Guyon, who only moments before was himself on the point of falling under its spell.

But all those pleasant bowres and Pallace braue,
 Guyon broke downe, with rigour pittillesse;
 Ne ought their goodly workmanship might saue
 Them from the tempest of his wrathfulnesse,
 But that their blisse he turn'd to balefulnesse:
 Their groues he feld, their gardins did deface,
 Their arbers spoyle, their Cabinets suppressse,
 Their banket houses burne, their buildings race,
 And of the fairest late, now made the fowlest place . . .

Said Guyon, See the mind of beastly man,
 That hath so soon forgot the excellence
 Of his creation, when he life began.³

Torn between *voluptas* and *pietas*, pleasure and piety, the poem releases the guilty tensions in an explosion of self-justifying violence. But Guyon is too obviously an allegory, a convenient fiction. He lacks the complexity, the unexpectedness, of the real. From the humorous folktales and comic-strip escapades of the German *Faustbuch*, Spenser's younger contemporary Marlowe was able to conjure a narrative that articulates in its central figure the tortured contradictions of Calvinist humanism, and to animate them with a tragic eloquence. Driven by a humanist will to knowledge and a Mirandolan sense of limitless potential, tormented by a conviction of his own worthlessness and inexorable damnation, Faustus swings uncontrollably between the hostile poles of knowledge and belief. A syncretic hellenism ('I confound Hell in Elysium', he assures Mephostophilis, who presumably knows otherwise) alternates vertiginously with Calvinist despair ('Now hast thou but one bare hour to live / And then thou must be damned perpetually') (Marlowe 1969: 336). 'Have not I made blind Homer sing to me?', he comforts himself in his terminal wretchedness, a doomed Petrarch communing with the ancients (ibid.: 285). But the Homeric Helen who consoles him in the shadow of his final hour is no vision of unsurpassable Greek loveliness; she is a succubus, a fraud, a mocking diabolical hologram.

Marlowe's play has a provocative and unsettling ambivalence that the political functionary Spenser could not afford. Faustus' devilish contract, his contemptuous dismissal of the entire curriculum of orthodox knowledge and belief in favour of necromancy, his blasphemous assertion that 'A sound magician is a demi-god' (Marlowe 1969: 268), are neither endorsed nor condemned – or rather, they seem to be *both* endorsed and condemned. Humanist aspiration and, in Mephostophilis, the desolation of the damned are voiced with equal vividness. Magic, in which Faustus believes he has found a 'logic of discovery' that will truly unlock the Baconian

'knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things' and admit him to 'the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible', is exposed as a sham. Mephostophilis is not 'conjured' by the scholar's imprecations, he comes unbidden, drawn by the smell of damnation; and the causes and secret motions of the universe elude the hero, who dwindles from a fearless cosmonaut of the intellect back into the harmless prankster of the *Faustbuch*. At the same time, the religious orthodoxy that condemns him for venturing 'more than heavenly power permits' seems both empty and laughable, a lumbering masquerade of deadly sins and capering demons. Like the enigmatic *dieu caché* of the Jansenists, the Calvinist deity remains hidden, perhaps indifferent.⁴

There is a Faustian confrontation at the climax of the last and perhaps the least-read of Milton's significant poems, *Paradise Regained* (1671). A young man is led by an older one to the summit of a mountain, from which opens out a panoramic prospect of the mediterranean world. What his companion shows him is, in effect, a humanist epiphany of origins: a living encounter with the ancients, in a scene bathed in the lambent glow of nostalgic longing:

behold

Where on the Aegean shore a city stands,
 Built nobly, pure the air and light the soil –
 Athens, the eye of Greece, mother of arts
 And eloquence, native to famous wits
 Or hospitable, in her sweet recess,
 City or suburban, studious walks and shades;
 See there the olive-grove of Academe,
 Plato's retirement, where the Attic bird
 Trills her thick-warbled notes the summer long;
 There, flowery hill, Hymettus, with the sound
 Of bees' industrious murmur, oft invites
 To studious musing; there Iliuss rolls

His whispering stream; within the walls then view
 The schools of ancient sages – his who bred
 Great Alexander to subdue the world,
 Lyceum there; and painted Stoa next:
 There thou shalt hear and learn the secret power
 Of harmony, in tones and numbers hit
 By voice or hand, and various-measured verse,
 Æolian charms and Dorian lyric odes,
 And his who gave them breath, but higher sung,
 Blind Melesigenes, thence Homer called,
 Whose poem Phœbus challenged for his own.

(Milton 1990: 492–3)

This evocation, by a blind poet, of an Athens he had been unable, even when younger and still sighted, to visit (a projected trip to Greece over thirty years earlier had been cut short at Rome) is a compelling testimony to the hallucinatory power of the humanist imagination, not least in its habit of seeing everything, as Johnson said of Milton, ‘through the spectacles of books’.⁵ For the description of the city and its environs is exclusively literary, and owes nothing to an indulgent topographical nostalgia. The ‘flowery hill, Hymettus’ and the little river Ilissus that rises on its lower slopes are there for their Platonic associations, and even the Attic nightingales that sing among the olives of the Academy and neighbouring Colonus owe their tuneful presence to Sophocles, not ornithology.

In context, however, this set piece of humanist reverie is powerfully dramatised, and ironised. For the elderly hellenist is the Devil, and his companion, to whom he is offering all that wisdom, power and beauty in return for a very reasonable Faustian concession (‘On this condition, if thou wilt fall down/And worship me as thy superior Lord’), is the youthful Jesus, whose reply demolishes with casual brutality three centuries of humanist scholarship, and much of Milton’s own writing into the bargain.

But these are false, or little else but dreams,
 Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm . . .
 . . . Who, therefore, seeks in these
 True wisdom finds her not, or, by delusion
 Far worse, her false resemblance only meets,
 An empty cloud. However, many books,
 Wise men have said, are wearisome; who reads
 Incessantly, and to his reading brings not
 A spirit or judgement equal or superior,
 (And what he brings, what needs he elsewhere seek?)
 Uncertain and unsettled still remains,
 Deep-versed in books and shallow in himself,
 Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys
 And trifles for choice matters, worth a sponge;
 As children gathering pebbles on the shore.

(Milton 1990: 495–6)

To what extent this rejection of Greek philosophy – indeed of reading itself – as the road to wisdom represents a public repudiation of the poet's own earlier humanism is still a matter of debate among Miltonists. In many ways, this English writer, product of one of the great humanist grammar schools, is the paradigmatic case of Protestant humanism, whose powerfully productive tensions and fusions permeate everything he wrote. Fluent in Latin and more than competent in Greek and Hebrew, he impressed the *literati* of the Florentine Academy with his idiomatic command of spoken and written Italian. His early writings, at least, are irradiated by Platonic idealism and a syncretic *allegoria* as bold as anything in Pico or Bruno. His role as intellectual conscience to Cromwell and the other leaders of the *coup d'état* of 1648–9 recalls that of Machiavelli with his Medici patrons, or More with the early Tudors. At the same time, Protestant conviction runs athwart the dialogical and controversial ethos of humanist debate. Christian truth may

be elusive, embattled, difficult of access; but it is ultimately certain and indivisible, and Milton's texts cannot, in the last uncompromising analysis, entertain the heuristic openness, the commitment to the divergent and unruly truths of dialogue itself, that characterise the humanist mode.

In any case, in view of Milton's own assertion that there is a necessary distance between the poet and the person represented, it is probably unhelpful to read the speech too directly as an authorial manifesto, though it seems unlikely that he would have put into the mouth of the Son of God sentiments that he himself found entirely repugnant. What is clear is that the passage delivers a blow to the authority of the book no less damaging than Bacon's empirical methodology. True, it does so in the name of a book – the Bible – in whose authors are to be found all the qualities of wisdom, eloquence and aesthetic beauty claimed for Greek literature,

As men divinely taught, and better teaching
The solid rules of civil government
In their majestic, unaffected style
Than all the oratory of Greece and Rome.
In them is plainest taught, and easiest learnt,
What makes a nation happy, and keeps it so,

(Milton 1990: 497)

and the treatment of scripture not as the fetishised 'Word of God' but as a text of human (and multiple) authorship whose function is essentially educational and secular suggests that the lines of communication with humanist pedagogy have not been conclusively severed. For all its Guyon-like revulsion against the seductive languor of a classical eloquence 'thick laid/As varnish on a Harlot's cheek' (ibid.: 496), Milton's poem is not ready to be reclaimed by an irrational fundamentalist salvationism. Its rejection of the *docta ignorantia* ('educated ignorance') of the scholars and the bookish

enthusiasms of the humanists (itself reminiscent of the humanist scepticism of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* and Cornelius Agrippa's *De vanitate scientiarum* (*The Emptiness of Learning*)) comes not from some wild-eyed enthusiast but from a learned, bookish young Jew, fully capable of turning on the writings of the ancients their own weapons of scepticism and scorn:

Think not but that I know these things; or, think
 I know them not, not therefore am I short
 Of knowing what I ought: he who receives
 Light from above, from the fountain of light,
 No other doctrine needs, thought granted true;
 But these are false, or little else but dreams,
 Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm.

(Milton 1990: 495)

But still, when all reservations have been made, and the humanist sources of Miltonic antihumanism fully acknowledged, this passage in the last book of his last poem remains a moment of significant rupture. The deliberate equivocation over whether the future Messiah has or has not read Plato and Aristotle ('Think not but that I know these things; or, think/I know them not') betokens not uncertainty but contemptuous indifference: the great preceptors of Athenian antiquity no longer have anything worthwhile to impart.

More tellingly still, their redundancy is delivered not by a superior scripture, a book (the Bible) that has the advantage of being true, but by a didactic that short-circuits the bibliocentric curriculum of the humanists entirely. *Deus illuminatio mea*: the 'inner light' that guided the conscientious choices of seventeenth-century Quakers and Anabaptists emboldened them to challenge all book-derived authority, including the authority of scripture itself. For them, the voice of God spoke not through the learned translations and marginal glosses of an Authorised Version bearing the imprimatur of a hated Church and State, but directly to the vernacular heart of every simple, unlettered man or woman, in the glow of an inner

illumination that signalled the immediate presence of divine truth. For all his praise of the Hebrew prophets,

men divinely taught, and better teaching
The solid rules of Civil Government
In their majestic unaffected style
Than all the Oratory of Greece and Rome,

(Milton 1990: 497)

the Miltonic ‘light from above’ is equally unconditional upon a textual mediation or a culture of literacy. ‘Men divinely taught’ need no books, and an ‘unaffected style’ of teaching can dispense with eloquence.

ENLIGHTENMENT

Milton’s writings – the political prose of the republican 1640s and 1650s no less than the biblical poems published twenty years later – had great prestige in the century and a half following his death in 1674. Alongside the reverential piety of the politically and ecclesiastically orthodox, they circulated widely among radicals and freethinkers. One of the earliest biographies of the poet was by the republican and freethinker John Toland, author of the rationalistic *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696). Benjamin Franklin incorporated a passage from *Paradise Lost* into the personal liturgy he devised for domestic use, setting it to a hymn-tune of his own composition. Thomas Jefferson’s commonplace book and private correspondence are full of Miltonic quotations and allusions.⁶ In France, he enjoyed the admiration of Voltaire and of Mirabeau, who published a translation of his 1644 argument for an uncensored press, *Areopagitica*, in 1788, the year in which the States General convened to protest at royal and clerical despotism; while his 1651 *Defence of the English People* justifying the trial and execution of Charles I became in 1792 a call for the same treatment to be dispensed to

the captive Louis XVI.⁷ Thomas Paine, who played a part in both the American and the French revolutions, ascribed his own deism and anticlericalism to his reading of Milton. In short, the blind poet who in 1667 had asked for ‘Celestial Light’ to

Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight

(Milton 1990: 201)

was himself enlisted as a secular scripture in the cause of what was already, by 1780, being called ‘enlightenment’. Thus his work became – through ruptures and contradictions as much as continuities of transmission – a medium of transit between those humanist discourses of the sixteenth century, classical, aristocratic and backward-looking, in which he himself had been educated and which saturate his early writings, and the revolutionary and bourgeois humanism of the eighteenth century, with its manifesto of progressive rational enlightenment through the heroic endeavours of emancipated Man.

Like ‘humanism’, with which it will henceforth become closely associated, ‘enlightenment’ has a German pedigree. The trope itself was widely current in the eighteenth century: French *philosophes* (sceptical rationalists critical of the intellectual, clerical and – sometimes – political status quo) talked of a ‘*siècle de lumières*’, an age of illumination; Anglican clergymen with well-bred connections and comfortable rural livings deplored the narrow fanaticism of their dissenting neighbours, and congratulated themselves on their enlightened broad-mindedness; and Pope’s epitaph for Isaac Newton,

Nature, and Nature’s laws, lay hid in night:
God said, *Let Newton be!* and all was light,

wittily rewrites the world-creating *fiat lux* of Genesis as a tribute to

the illuminative powers of scientific reason.⁸ But it was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, in an essay published in 1784 entitled ‘Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’ (Answer to the question: what is enlightenment?), who gave the word its discursive authority, offering it as a normative description of the epoch:

Enlightenment is the end of the self-imposed infancy of humankind . . . *Sapere aude!* [Dare to know!]. Thus the motto of enlightenment is, have the courage to follow your own understanding . . . If it should be asked: do we live now in an enlightened age [*in einem aufgeklärten Zeitalter*]? the answer must be: no, but we surely live in an age of enlightenment [*in einem Zeitalter der Aufklärung*].

(Kant 1867: 162)

The capitalisation of the noun and the use of the definite article, both normal in German, probably helped to promote the important slippage from the standard eighteenth-century attribute (‘enlightenment’) to the substantive abstraction (*the Enlightenment*) that operates even today as a commonplace of intellectual history.

With this essay of Kant, writes his biographer, ‘the philosophy of the Enlightenment has . . . reached its supreme goal’ and ‘finds its lucid, programmatic conclusion’.

The evolution of mankind’s spiritual history coincides with the progress, the ever keener comprehension, and the progressive deepening of the idea of freedom . . . [*Sapere aude!*] is at the same time the motto of all human history, for the process of self-liberation, the progress from natural bondage toward the spirit’s autonomous consciousness of itself and of its task, constitutes the only thing that can be called genuine ‘becoming’ in the spiritual sense.

(Cassirer 1981: 227–8)

Kant's project, which laid the foundations for the neo-humanism of von Humboldt and his colleagues, sought to construct a secure grounding for human knowledge that would not require an appeal to any authority beyond its own means of knowing. The history of philosophy from Bacon and Descartes to Kant and Hegel is characterised, it has been said, by a 'tendency . . . to replace ontology by epistemology' (Cassirer 1981: xv): that is, to replace questions about the world with questions about the mind, what exists with how that existence is known. While the Baconian investigator sets out to elicit the secret laws of nature, clearing his mind of the idols of prejudice in order to see more clearly what is actually there, Kant argues that there is nothing 'there' that has not been put there by the already-existing categories of thought. Reason does not observe nature; it constitutes it. With its strict separation of means and ends, its absolute distinction between the instrumental world of non-rational nature ('things') and the sovereign authority of rational humankind ('persons'), Kant's 'transcendental idealism' completes the theoretical demolition of religion, relocating its usurped authority within the human mind and will. 'Act only', states the 'categorical imperative' that governs all human conduct,

according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law . . . The practical imperative, therefore, is the following: Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.

(Cassirer 1981: 245, 248)

'Enlightenment behaves towards things', remarked Adorno, 'as a dictator towards men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them.' Like the Florentine *umanisti* and their European pupils, whose writings rationalised the domestic and political culture of their princely patrons, the *philosophes* who promoted the humanistic values of enlightenment enjoyed a close if sometimes

uncomfortable relationship with power. Rousseau's stormy involvement with the Commune of Geneva and Voltaire's symbiotic intimacy with the cultivated autocrats Catherine II of Russia and Frederick II of Prussia are the most obvious cases; but Helvetius, in a book (*De l'homme*, 1772) dedicated to Catherine II, wrote in praise of 'enlightened despotism'; and though not directly pensionary in the same way, Diderot, Hume and Kant (whom Heine called 'the Robespierre of the intellect', and who dedicated his *Universal Natural History* to Frederick II), saw themselves nonetheless as critics of benighted tyranny and superstition, and apostles of a new politico-intellectual order predicated on the universal axioms of human rationality and self-control.

Humanism, in this eighteenth-century context, still needs to be used parenthetically, since the word was not yet available. But the 'Man' around whom the discourses of enlightenment are articulated, rational, sovereign and unconditional, betokens the emergence of a fully-fledged humanism in all but name. Jonathan Swift's protest against the engulfing sentimentality of proto-humanist philanthropy ('all my love is towards individuals . . . I hate and detest that animal called man; although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas and so forth') counts as nothing against his friend Pope's declaration that 'The proper study of mankind is man'.⁹

Pope's polite deism ('presume not God to scan'), from which it is only a short step to the undisguised indifference of Edward Gibbon and the open atheism of David Hume, suggests the extent to which, since Milton, religious determinations, even when not explicitly repudiated, have lost all authority. The point can be made by contrasting the eighteenth-century usage with an earlier hypostatisation of 'Man': the condemnation or deprecation, generally with strong biblical associations, of human pride and folly. When Shakespeare's Isabella, in the accents of the pulpit, denounces 'man, proud man, Drest in a little brief authority, Most ignorant of what he's most assured', or his contemporary Raleigh invokes the figure

of 'eloquent, just, and mighty Death' to rebuke 'all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man', the impulse has nothing in common with 'humanism': a generalised 'man' is called up only to be exposed to a shrivelling judgement whose authority is still essentially theological.¹⁰ In contrast, though Kant may have retained all his life the Protestant pietism of his Prussian upbringing, the 'categorical imperative' that requires us unconditionally to treat other human beings as ends, not means, draws its warrant not from scripture but from the absolute sovereignty of secular reason. Diderot, without even the fig-leaf of a conventional piety, referred to Christianity with scorn as 'the Great Prejudice'; and Hume, who had been delighted to find, on a visit to France in 1765, 'almost universal Contempt of all Religion, among both Sexes, and among all Ranks of Men' (Gay 1970: 342), dismayed the sentimentally pious James Boswell by declaring on his deathbed that his only regret was not to have completed the 'great work' of 'making his countrymen wiser and particularly in delivering them from the Christian superstition' (ibid.: 341).

Earlier humanists had been suspected of unorthodoxy, even of infidelity, and most, including clerics like Erasmus and Bruno, were anticlerical, though rarely anti-religious. Even Hobbes and Locke observed the necessary protocols of piety, while scarcely bothering to conceal their lack of interest. It was the *aufgeklärte* of the eighteenth century, armed (wrote Condorcet) with 'their battle-cry – *reason, tolerance, humanity*', who uncoupled the rhetoric of Man from the apparatus of creation myth and eschatological anxiety that had encumbered it till then, and established the association between humanism and atheism which persists in the humanist associations and secular societies of the present day.

Nietzsche remarked that while 'the seventeenth century *suffers* from *humanity* as from a *host of contradictions*', the eighteenth 'tries to forget what is known of man's nature, in order to adapt him to its Utopia' (Hollingdale 1973: 97). 'Man' is articulated, now, not by

but against religion; not within but apart from ‘society’; not as a part, even a privileged part, of ‘nature’, but outside it. Rousseau’s Man is born (not ‘created’) free, but immediately enchained by the shackles of a discredited social order. Nature, for Diderot as for Kant, derives its interest, indeed its meaningful existence, solely from the presence of rational Man:

If mankind, or the thinking and contemplative beings which comprise it, were banished from the surface of the earth, the moving and sublime spectacle of nature would be nothing more than a scene of desolation and silence. The universe would be mute; stillness and night would take possession of it . . . It is the presence of man which renders other beings interesting, and what better consideration can we bring to bear in dealing with the history of such creatures? Why should we not introduce man into our work, as he has been placed in the universe? Why not make man the central focus?

(Diderot 1992: 25)

‘Man is the measure of all things’: such, according to Plato, had been the doctrine of the philosopher Protagoras. Those eighteenth-century humanists who adopted it as their motto chose to overlook the moral relativism Protagoras deduced from it, and to ignore Socrates’ clinical deconstruction of the rhetorical abstraction ‘man’, and the hopeless inconsistencies that follow from his substitution of ‘you or I’ for its hollow singularity.¹¹ For them, as David Hume put it, ‘There is no question of importance, whose decision is not compriz’d in the science of man’ (Hume 1978: xvi), that transcendental figure who is defined in Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* as ‘the unique starting point, and the end to which everything must finally be related’ (Diderot 1992: 293).

Of course, ‘George Bush is the measure of all things’ or ‘all questions of science are at bottom questions about the Archbishop of Canterbury’ doesn’t have quite the same resonance. For one thing, they restore the forgotten gender, the historical lineaments

of culture. In the figure of universal Man, the 'little a' of Hamlet's piece of work is finally erased; and the radical power of the figure, its truly revolutionary capacity, depends on that erasure. Revolutions are made in the name not of 'you or me', but of 'humanity'. Only later, when the job is done, do they disclose their hidden purposes.

In getting rid of the deity, Sartre observed, the *philosophes* did not abandon the notion of a transcendental Being; they simply renamed it.

In the philosophic atheism of the eighteenth century, the notion of God is suppressed, but not, for all that, the idea that essence is prior to existence; something of that idea we still find everywhere, in Diderot, in Voltaire and even in Kant. Man possesses a human nature; that 'human nature', which is the conception of human being, is found in every man; which means that each man is a particular example of an universal conception, the conception of Man.

(Sartre 1948: 27)

This essentialism, which we might take as a precondition if not a definition of humanism itself, and which serves to differentiate it from earlier humanistic formulations of the figure, will last for two hundred years, and perhaps beyond. Even today, with its conceptual and political credibility in decline, it persists in every commonsense appeal to human nature, to the 'central, truly human point of view'. Like Crusoe cast adrift upon an indifferent nature by an oppressive society and an absentee Creator, enlightened Man, the only subject in a universe of objects, contemplates himself in the majestic solitude of his sovereign rationality, and broods upon the new world that awaits its creation.

CONCLUSION: ON THE WORD

It must seem frustrating to many readers of a book on humanism that I have throughout resisted the temptation to offer anything as straightforwardly helpful as a definition of the word, choosing instead to stress the plurality, complexity and fluidity of meanings it has been able to deploy or suggest. Indeed, if Humpty Dumpty is right – as he surely is – to insist that meaning is a form of mastery, not inherent in a word but torn from it in an unending struggle of definitions, then it may be that the meanings of ‘humanism’ have operated most powerfully precisely at those moments when they have been most contested, and thus most elusive or opaque to definition. In any case, I have chosen to explore the *how* and *why* of the various humanisms, their instrumentality and intentionality, leaving the *what* to the lexicographers. But the word insists on its due, and the time has come to acknowledge the responsibilities of authorship and the reasonable demands of readers.

The root-word is, quite literally, humble (*humilis*), from the Latin *humus*, earth or ground; hence *homo*, earth-being, and *humanus*, earthy, human. The contrast, from the outset, is with

other earth-creatures (animals, plants), and with another order of beings, the sky-dwellers or gods (*deus/divus, divinus*). By later antiquity and the so-called ‘Middle Ages’, scholars and clerics had developed a distinction between *divinitas*, the fields of knowledge and activity deriving from scripture, and *humanitas*, those relating to the practical affairs of secular life (the study of languages and literatures is still sometimes referred to as ‘the humanities’); and since the latter drew much of their inspiration and their raw material from the writings of Roman and, increasingly, Greek antiquity, the (usually) Italian translators and teachers of those writings came to call themselves *umanisti*, ‘humanists’.

So far, the little constellation of words from which *humanism* will emerge looks reassuringly clear and technical: ‘humanity’ is that area of curricular knowledge that includes rhetoric, logic, mathematics and the study of Greek and Roman authors; and a ‘humanist’ is someone who teaches those subjects or provides material for others who do so. But already at the outset complexity and muddle threaten. As early as the second century AD the Roman essayist Aulus Gellius was warning his readers against the dangers of confusion and vulgar sentimentality, and insisting that ‘*humanitas* does not mean what the common people think’:

Those who have spoken Latin and have used the language correctly do not give the word *humanitas* the meaning which it is commonly thought to have, namely, what the Greeks call *philanthropia*, signifying a kind of friendly spirit and good-feeling towards all men without distinction; but they gave to *humanitas* about the force of the Greek *paideia*: that is, what we call *eruditionem institutionemque in bonos artes*, or ‘education and training in the liberal arts’. Those who earnestly desire and seek after these are most highly humanized [*maxime humanissimi*]. For the pursuit of this kind of knowledge, and the training given by it, have been granted to man above all the

animals, and for that reason it is termed *humanitas*, or 'humanity'.

(Gellius 1967: 457–8)

Gellius' assurance that this 'is the sense that our earlier writers have used the word' does not stand up, either, since it is clear that classical authors, including his beloved and authoritative Cicero, were using *humanitas* freely in both its educational and its ethical sense at least two centuries earlier.

Aulus Gellius, writing in Athens and Rome during the *imperium* of Antoninus and Marcus Aurelius, stands near the head of those processes, cultural, political and linguistic, within which 'humanism' and 'the humanities' will later be generated; and already, he anticipates many of their discursive dispositions – their élitism, their canonical purism, their tendency to identify the 'human' with the tastes and values of educated Europeans of a certain class. His *Attic Nights* were widely current in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and helped shape the mental habits of the *umanisti* and their aristocratic pupils; to such an extent, indeed, that he becomes by adoption a 'Renaissance' writer, as much as an ancient one. Or perhaps even a modern, since his call to quarantine the 'original' meaning of *humanitas* against the infections of humanitarian sentiment and unlettered ignorance finds a curious echo much later, amid the ruins of another world-conquering empire, in the donnish etymologies of Martin Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism':

It is precisely in these terms that *humanitas* is first defined and pursued. *Homo humanus* positions himself in opposition to *homo barbarus*. And *homo humanus* means in this instance the Roman, he who embodies Roman *virtus* and improves himself by 'colonising' what the Greeks called *paideia* . . . *Paideia* in this sense is carried over into *humanitas* . . . It is in Rome that we encounter the first humanism.

(Heidegger 1976: 320)

The 'Letter' was written in part to protest at the adoption of Heidegger's pre-war writings in support of the humanist existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, in which, in Sartre's words, 'every man realises himself in realising a type of humanity' (Sartre 1948: 47). What Heidegger proposes for the word is an act of radical archaeological restoration, like the cleaning of an old painting, or the reconstruction of the ruined fabric of an ancient building:

With regard to this more essential *humanitas* of homo *humanus* there arises the possibility of restoring to the word 'humanism' a historical sense that is older than its oldest meaning chronologically reckoned . . . 'Humanism' now means, in case we decide to retain the word, that the essence of man is essential for the truth of Being, specifically in such a way that the word does not pertain simply to man as such.

(Heidegger 1976: 345)

In other words, humanism remains usable as a philosophical concept, but only after it has been purged of the romantic and positivist anthropologies of 'man as such', and its connections with the semantic muddles of philanthropic 'humanity' irreparably severed.

These drastic realignments, which would wrench the word forcibly from its native habitat and isolate it in the purer air of a single essential and immutable meaning, would certainly simplify the problem of definition. Curiously, in view of its historical derivation, the manoeuvre is easier in German, where the relationship between *Humanismus* (humanism) and *Menschlichkeit* (human/ity) is untroubled by family likeness¹ (as it is in Heidegger's beloved Greek, which has no clear equivalent to *humanitas*), than it is in English and the romance languages (or Gellius' Latin, for that matter). But in truth, the quest for an original – or even a pre-original – meaning is chimerical. The meaning of 'humanism' is the semantic tangle, or grapple, that makes its meanings so difficult to grasp. The problem of meaning,

to recall Humpty Dumpty once more, belongs not to semantics but to politics – the definitional will-to-power, the question of ‘which is to be master’; and that, even in the most authoritarian of linguistic tyrannies, is never unilateral or uncontested.

The case of Heidegger, around whom contemporary debates about humanism circle warily like dogs around a wounded bear, will serve as an example of just how much can be at stake in the seemingly simple matter of definition. He strove, in his critique of metaphysical and rhetorical error, his insistence that ‘Man’ is not the imperious subject but merely the object, the recipient, of ‘Being’, not the creator of language but its creature, to position himself outside the assumptions of European thinking since Plato, and the anthropocentric illusion that lies at its heart, even while his hellenism and Teutonic nationalism identify him as the obedient child of Humboldtian humanism. At the same time, he contended that to reject the metaphysical humanism of post-Platonic thought, with its narrowly ‘Roman’ conception of what is human, in no way entails a repudiation of the common attachments and obligations of humanity itself. Philosophical antihumanism must not be confused with actual inhumanity.

Because someone criticises ‘humanism’, people suspect a defence of the inhumane and a glorification of barbaric brutality. For what could be more ‘logical’ than to suppose that, for one who has said no to humanism, only the affirmation of inhumanity remains?

(Heidegger 1976: 346)

Yet the Heidegger who wrote these words in 1947 had reason to know, better than most, that the conjunction of contemplative antihumanism with practical inhumanity could indeed on occasion have more substance than the vulgar confusion he castigates here. For the brilliant Rector of the University of Freiburg, who had so contemptuously repudiated his teacher Husserl and condoned the destruction of the careers, and perhaps the lives, of some of his own Jewish colleagues, did indeed deliver,

in his 1936 inaugural address, ‘a glorification of barbaric brutality’; not in so many words, to be sure, but in terms that unmistakably endorsed the *imperium* of the Master Race and lent it intellectual authority.

Heidegger was no unworldly innocent or opportunistic fellow-traveller, but for several years an active and enthusiastic Nazi; and if the ‘Letter on Humanism’ and his other post-war writings can be read as an *apologia pro vita sua*, they are a uniquely opaque and unapologetic one. Indeed, his turn against his former masters was prompted not by any revulsion at their unparalleled inhumanity but by the realisation that their rhetoric concealed an essentially Kantian *humanism*:

The futility of Nazism becomes evident, however, once we recognise that it is precisely this humanistic tendency to treat humans as the ultimate goal, rather than as a means to achieving the authentic goal, that has created the sense of the aimlessness and nihilism of modern existence.

(Guignan 1993: 34)

This Nietzschean insight recalls Adorno’s identification of Nazism as the inner logic of humanist enlightenment, while also giving some support to his claim that Heidegger’s thought was ‘fascist in its most fundamental terms’. But Adorno, too, was not entirely innocent on this score, and his attack on his compatriot was prompted in part by guilty self-justification.² In the matter of humanity, there are no clean hands. On the question of humanism, nothing is more suspect than clarity.

So there will not after all be, nor indeed could there be, any tidy definitions. The several humanisms – the civic humanism of the quattrocento Italian city-states, the Protestant humanism of sixteenth-century northern Europe, the rationalistic humanism that attended at the revolutions of enlightened modernity, and the romantic and positivistic humanisms through which the European bourgeoisies established their hegemony over it, the revolutionary humanism that shook the

world and the liberal humanism that sought to tame it, the humanism of the Nazis and the humanism of their victims and opponents, the antihumanist humanism of Heidegger and the humanist antihumanism of Foucault and Althusser – are not reducible to one, or even to a single line or pattern. Each has its distinctive historical curve, its particular discursive poetics, its own problematic scansion of the human. Each seeks, as all discourses must, to impose its own answer to the question of ‘which is to be master’.

Meanwhile, the problem of humanism remains, for the present, an inescapable horizon within which all attempts to think about the ways in which human beings have, do, might live together in and on the world are contained. Not that the actual humanisms described here necessarily provide a model, or even a useful history, least of all for those very numerous people, and peoples, for whom they have been alien and oppressive. Some, at least, offer a grim warning. Certainly it should no longer be possible to formulate phrases like ‘the destiny of man’ or ‘the triumph of human reason’ without an instant consciousness of the folly and brutality they drag behind them.

All humanisms, until now, have been imperial. They speak of the human in the accents and the interests of a class, a sex, a ‘race’. Their embrace suffocates those whom it does not ignore. The first humanists scripted the tyranny of Borgias, Medicis and Tudors. Later humanisms dreamed of freedom and celebrated Frederick II, Bonaparte, Bismarck, Stalin. The liberators of colonial America, like the Greek and Roman thinkers they emulated, owned slaves. At various times, not excluding the present, the circuit of the human has excluded women, those who do not speak Greek or Latin or English, those whose complexions are not pink, children, Jews. It is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of humanity.

At the same time, though it is clear that the master narrative of transcendental Man has outlasted its usefulness, it would be unwise

simply to abandon the ground occupied by the historical humanisms. For one thing, some variety of humanism remains, on many occasions, the only available alternative to bigotry and persecution. The freedom to speak and write, to organise and campaign in defence of individual or collective interests, to protest and disobey: all these, and the prospect of a world in which they will be secured, can only be articulated in humanist terms. It is true that the Baconian ‘Knowledge of Causes, and Secrett Motions of Things’, harnessed to an overweening rationality and an unbridled technological will to power, has enlarged the bounds of human empire to the point of endangering the survival of the violated planet on which we live. But how, if not by mobilising collective resources of human understanding and responsibility, of ‘enlightened self-interest’ even, can that danger be turned aside?

The Jewish philosopher Emanuel Lévinas has written of the possibility of an *‘humanisme de l’autre homme’*, a concept and practice of the human that proceeds not – like Descartes’ self-contemplative ‘I’ or Kant’s transcendental subjectivity – from a primary centred ego reaching out to know and seize the world, but from an irreducible ‘other’, the not-I that defines me for myself. Lévinas retraces here the gesture of those structuralist and post-humanist thinkers like Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, for whom the speaking, conscious ‘I’ is always provisional and secondary to the orders of language and social meaning within which it constructs itself. But his writing, though refreshingly free of the complacent philanthropic piety of much contemporary humanism, retains an ethical register denied to those for whom the human is simply an effect of structure or discourse. Humanity is neither an essence nor an end, but a continuous and precarious process of becoming human, a process that entails the inescapable recognition that our humanity is on loan from others, to precisely the extent that we acknowledge it in them. For those ‘westerners’ whose humanness is mortgaged to the suffering and labour of an

innumerable 'Other', the recognition cannot be comfortable or merely reflective. The humanity of Prospero is defined – conferred, conditioned – by Caliban; and the implications for both are political no less than philosophical.

There is a poem by Ted Hughes, 'Wodwo', that hauntingly recreates the process of becoming human. A creature – a voice, a consciousness, a sense of touch and smell – is exploring its environment, feeling for texture and response, mapping the fluid boundaries of identity.

I seem to have been given the freedom
of this place what am I then? And picking
bits of bark off this rotten stump gives me
no pleasure and it's no use so why do I do it
me and doing that have coincided very queerly
But what shall I be called am I the first
have I an owner what shape am I what
shape am I am I huge if I go
to the end on this way past these trees and past these trees
till I get tired that's touching one wall of me . . .

The poem is about identity as movement, not destination; seeking, not finding. There is no climactic discovery of self, and the ending lacks the closure of, say, Browning's 'Caliban upon Setebos', a poem to which it bears a superficial resemblance ('Will sprawl, now that the heat of day is best, Flat on his belly in the pit's much mire'):

for the moment if I sit still how everything
stops to watch me I suppose I am the exact centre
but there's all this what is it roots
roots roots roots and here's the water
again very queer but I'll go on looking³

It might be a baby, an early hominid, the mutilated and mutant

survivor of some global devastation, groping towards language and consciousness.⁴The Wodwo – a wild forest-dwelling creature borrowed from the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – is at once ourselves (the infant or ancestor we carry within us) and everything that is not ourselves (the pre-human, the savage, the brute). But the figure resists romantic infantilism (Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode') and Lawrentian primitivism both, allowing its own proto-humanity to emerge as if recognised for the first time, through words that are both ordinary and utterly strange; an Ovidian metamorphosis in reverse, speechless matter feeling towards voice and shape.

Hughes, who included a poem about Sartre in the collection that takes its title from 'Wodwo', might almost have been thinking of the French philosopher's critique of the Enlightenment figure of universal Man:

each man is a particular example of an universal conception, the conception of Man. In Kant, this universality goes so far that the wild man of the woods, man in the state of nature and the bourgeois are all contained in the same definition and have the same fundamental qualities . . . the essence of man precedes that historic existence which we confront in experience.

(Sartre 1948: 27)

But for an even more telling commentary on the poem, we must turn to a recent essay by Jean-François Lyotard, best known as the pioneering cartographer of the 'postmodern condition', in which he ponders the boundary lines that have been drawn between the human and its cultural antonyms – non-human, pre-human, inhuman. Is it a question, he asks, reformulating Rousseau's postulate of a primal freedom, of a creature born human, only to learn inhumanity from its fellow humans? Or is it humanity that we learn, in that painful journey into language and social existence?

What shall we call human in humans, the initial misery of their

childhood, or their capacity to acquire a 'second' nature which, thanks to language, makes them fit to share in communal life, adult consciousness and reason?

For Lyotard, there can be no final resolution of the dilemma: it is precisely the oscillation between the two definitions, between 'biological' and 'cultural' humanities, that constitutes the question of the human. But his account of the newborn infant has a pathos that irresistibly recalls Hughes' 'elemental little thing', and seems both to endorse the humanity of the not-yet-human, and to arraign the inhumanity of the human world in which it finds itself:

Shorn of speech, incapable of standing upright, hesitating over its objects of interest, not able to calculate its advantages, not sensitive to common reason, the child is eminently the human because its distress heralds and promises things possible. Its initial delay in humanity, which makes it the hostage of the adult community, is also what manifests to this community the lack of humanity it is suffering from, and which calls on it to become more human.

(Lyotard 1991: 3–4)

'Wodwo', likewise, offers no Kantian solidarity with the essentially human, no consoling recognition of a shared condition. The poem inhabits a world beyond humanism, in which the human can no longer be taken for granted, but must be rediscovered anew in each encounter with a ceaselessly changing reality. For the heirs and curators of European humanism, on whom, as Marx said, 'the tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare' (Marx 1973b: 146), the task of defining humanity has passed elsewhere. Others will tell us if we are human, and what that means. Whether it leads in turn to new humanisms, and whether they will find a way to avoid the essentialism and imperialism of the old, it is much too early to say.

POSTSCRIPT

Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so makes the storm itself manifest in its violence . . . The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves.

(Heidegger 1971: 42–3)

Some time on the night of 31 May 1941, two young Athenians managed to scramble up onto the Acropolis and, without alerting the German soldiers on guard duty, make their way to the east end of the Parthenon. On their way back down a little later, the boys were stopped and questioned by a Greek gendarme; but either he suspected nothing, or he chose to ignore what he suspected, and they were allowed to go on their way. In the morning, the flag was gone.

The German Command announced that the culprits would be rounded up and summarily executed. But the two were never caught. One, Manolis Glezos, joined the KKE (Greek Communist Party), and spent the rest of the war fighting with ELAS partisans in the Pindos mountains, surviving the Nazi occupation only to be shot by the American- and British-supported National Army of

Greece while attempting to leave the country in February 1948, just one more insignificant casualty of the brutal civil war that followed the German defeat. What became of his friend is not known.¹

Compared with the suffering and heroism that were soon to become commonplace in occupied Greece, the incident seems negligible, almost comically waggish and ineffectual. The flag was immediately replaced, and the bloody subjugation of the Balkan peninsula proceeded unchecked. But that symbolic act of 'heroic madness' helped galvanise a population stunned by the speed and ruthlessness of the occupation, and to inspire a civilian resistance which, in spite of famine, savage reprisals, and the indifference of the Allied Powers, who feared Balkan communism as much as German fascism, persisted to the end of the war and beyond.

Nothing infuriates Greeks more than the northern hellenism that parades a proprietary reverence for the Greece of Pericles and Plato while not bothering to conceal its contempt for their modern descendants, whom it views not as Hellenes but as an ungovernable rabble of Slavic impostors and Levantine degenerates. But for many Greeks there is pride too, and a sense of identity and continuity across the long centuries of occupation and exile; feelings none the less genuine for having been so readily exploited by demagogues and tyrants. The resoundingly-titled 'Third Hellenic Civilisation' of the ultra-nationalist General Ioannis Metaxas was no more, it is true, than a pasteboard imitation of the Teutonic 'Third Reich' that was soon to sweep it so ruthlessly away. But Greek schoolchildren in the 1930s, like their contemporaries in the Gymnasiums of Munich and Hamburg, read Homer and Thucydides; and it may be that Glezos and his nameless comrade were inspired by an hellenic idealism no less fervent in its homespun way than that of the occupying generals. So those two spectral figures, glimpsed for a moment in the shadow of the great temple on a moonlit night in the spring of 1941, deserve their footnote in the troubled chronicles of humanism, alongside their ancestors and their enemies.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF HUMANISM

1. Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68), philosopher of aesthetics and author of the widely influential *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), poet, scientist and Hellenist. Goethe called the eighteenth century 'the century of Winckelmann'. See Bernal 1987: 212–14.
2. For an account of this episode, see M.A. Crowther, *Church Embattled: Religious Controversy in Mid-Victorian England*, Newton Abbot 1970, pp. 20–35.
3. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, London 1755, under 'Humanist'.
4. See Peter Burke, *The Renaissance*, London 1987, for a survey of these different positions. Burke himself settles for the pragmatic view that the word offers 'an organising concept which still has its uses' (p. 5).
5. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, London 1869.
6. T.W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cummings, London 1973. See pp. 51, 107, 120.

1 THE INVENTION OF HUMANITY

1. The photograph is reproduced in Bullock 1985: 174; see also Mazower 1993: 6–7.
2. Bernal 1987: 330–6.
3. 'There is no such thing as a revolution in art: there is only one eternal art – the Greek-Nordic art . . . anything which deserves the name of art can always only be Nordic-Greek' (Norman H. Baynes, ed., *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler*, London 1942, I, p. 567; see also I, p. 598).
4. The phrase comes from Johnson's *Life of Milton*, and refers to the pastoral elegy *Lycidas*. But it is better suited to the style of Milton's eighteenth-century imitators.
5. Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), edited by Andrew Sanders, Oxford 1989, p. 353.
6. Unitarians (the poet Coleridge was one) denied the Trinity, believing

God to be a single being, at once divine and human. More generally, the word implied a freedom from theological doctrine.

7. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, London 1930.
8. For an account of Nietzsche, see pp. 35–8.
9. T.H. Huxley (1825–95), biologist and author of *Man's Place in Nature*; Charles Bradlaugh (1833–91), MP and editor of the *National Reformer*, who fought a six-year battle with the House of Commons over his right to affirm rather than swear on the Bible.
10. J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester 1984. Lyotard defines the postmodern as 'incredulity towards narratives' (p. xxiv).
11. For fuller discussion of this, see pp. 121–4.
12. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. 31. *Philosophes* is the name given in France to freethinking intellectuals, particularly those associated with Voltaire, Diderot and the *Encyclopaedia*. See pp. 118ff.
13. Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' (1891), in *Selected Essays and Poems*, Harmondsworth 1954, p. 19.
14. John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, London 1865.
15. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. J.W. Harvey, Harmondsworth 1965, p. 894.
16. Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (1878), London 1995, p. 33.
17. Henry James, *The Bostonians* (1886), Harmondsworth 1966 p. 20.

2 FROM HUMANISM TO ANTIHUMANISM

1. See Mill's *Autobiography*, London 1873, chapter 3.
2. John Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, 21 December 1817.
3. F.R. Leavis, 'E.M. Forster', in *The Common Pursuit*, Harmondsworth 1962, p. 277.
4. Thomas Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (1918), trans. Walter D. Morris, New York 1983, p. 315.
5. Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter, Harmondsworth 1968, p. 14.
6. *Doctor Faustus*, pp. 55–7.
7. W.B. Yeats, 'A General Introduction For my Work' in *Essays and Introductions*, London 1961, p. 522; D.H. Lawrence, letter to David Garnett,

- in *Selected Letters*, Harmondsworth 1950, p. 18; T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), London 1960, p. 58.
8. T.S. Eliot, 'Dante', in *Selected Essays*, London 1951.
 9. See pp. 52–3.
 10. Pound's antihumanism is nowhere more humanist than in its recycling of the traditional repertoire of Renaissance misogyny; see pp. 86–91.
 11. George Steiner, 'Silence and the Poet', in *Language and Silence* (1967) Harmondsworth 1969: 'It is better for the poet to mutilate his own tongue than to dignify the inhuman either with his gift or his uncaring. If totalitarian rule is so effective as to break all chances of denunciation, of satire, then let the poet cease (and let the scholar cease from editing the classics a few miles down the road from the death camp)' (p. 76); T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London 1973; *Hamlet*, I, ii, 150.
 12. For an account of these debates, see Alan Swingewood, *The Myth of Mass Culture*, London 1977.
 13. *Hamlet*, II, ii. See pp. 98–9.
 14. Jonson 1975: 435. See p. 79.
 15. Arthur Rimbaud, letter to Georges Izambard, in *Rimbaud*, ed. Oliver Bernard, Harmondsworth 1962 p. 6: 'C'est faux de dire: Je pense. On devrait dire: On me pense. JE est un autre.'
 16. See G. Stedman Jones *et al.*, *Western Marxism: A Critical Reader*, London 1977, pp. 314, 274.
 17. For example, Nelson Mandela's inaugural speech as President of the Republic of South Africa called for 'an actual South African reality that will reinforce humanity's belief in justice' and 'strengthen its confidence in the nobility of the human soul' (*Time*, 24 January 1994, p. 41).
 18. Karl Marx, 'Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy' (1859), in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, London 1968, pp. 180–84.
 19. Edward Bond, 'The Rational Theatre', in *Plays: Two*, London 1978, p. xv.
 20. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure*, Harmondsworth 1986.

3 HUMANISTS BEFORE HUMANISM: THE RENAISSANCE

1. Dante Alighieri, *Literature in the Vernacular*, trans. Sally Purcell, Manchester 1981, p. 34.
2. Edmund Spenser, *Poetical Works*, ed. J.C. Smith and E. de Selincourt, London 1912, p. 417.

3. See, for example, A.L. Morton, *The English Utopia*, London 1978, p. 76:
4. 'it is not until modern times that his Utopia could be properly understood. Until the birth of scientific socialism it was no more than a dream'; J.H. Hexter, in *More* 1965: cxxiii–iv.
5. *Hamlet*, III, i, 154.
6. Giordano Bruno, *The Heroic Frenzies*, trans. P.E. Memmo, *Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures* 50, 1964, p. 60.
7. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago 1980.
8. John Milton, *Complete Prose Works*, vol. 1, New Haven, CT, 1953, p. 890.
9. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* (1512); Bruno, *Frenzies*, p. 123; Spenser, *Poetical Works*, p. 139 (see pp. 110–11).
10. Bacon 1905: 710–32; John Milton, *History of Britain*, in *Complete Prose Works*, vol. 5, Part 1, ed. French Fogle, New Haven, CT, 1971 p. 32.
11. See Craven 1981. Craven dates the essentialist and universalising reading of the Oration from the publication of Cassirer's *Essay on Man* (1944).
12. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 1993, vol. 20, pp. 665ff.

4 HUMANISM AND ENLIGHTENMENT

1. T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London 1973, p. 9.
2. Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*, sonnet IV; Sidney 1965: 101.
3. Edmund Spenser, *Poetical Works*, ed. J.C. Smith and E. de Selincourt, London 1912, p. 139.
4. See Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, London 1964.
5. Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets* (1779), London, World's Classics, 1906, p. 128.
6. See *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. David Armitage *et al.*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 254 ff.
7. *Milton and Republicanism*, p. 269.
8. Alexander Pope, 'Epitaph Intended for Sir Isaac Newton', *Collected Poems*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée, London 1956, p. 122.
9. Jonathan Swift, letter to Pope, 29 September 1725; Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle II, 2.
10. Shakespeare, *Measure For Measure*, II, ii, 117–19; Walter Raleigh, *A History of the World* (1614) V, vi, 12.
11. Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library, New York 1928, pp. 41ff. The thoroughness of Socrates' demolition has

not deterred later humanists: F.C.S. Schiller (*Studies in Humanism*, London 1907) defends Protagoras on the grounds that by *anthropos* he means not 'each person' but 'mankind'.

CONCLUSION: ON THE WORD

1. cf the passage from Nietzsche quoted on p. 33.
2. See Lacoue-Labarthe 1990: 117–18. In 1934 Adorno had written a favourable review of a song-cycle based on poems by the Nazi writer Baldur von Schirach, praising it for being 'consciously National Socialist' and for embodying 'the image of a new romanticism'.
3. Ted Hughes, 'Wodwo', in *Wodwo*, London 1964, p. 183.
4. Hughes himself has described it as 'some sort of satyr or half-man or half-animal, half all kinds of elemental little things, just a little larval being without shape or qualities who suddenly finds himself alive in this world at any time' (Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, Cambridge 1975, p. 98). It's not clear how far this casual gendering of the 'little larval being', carefully avoided in the poem itself, is inadvertent.

POSTSCRIPT

1. Mazower 1993: 86; C.M. Woodhouse, *The Struggle for Greece*, London 1976, p. 21; Christos Christides, *Chronia Katochis* [The Years of Occupation], Athens 1971.

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