The Mythos, Ethos, and Pathos of the Humanities

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Summary

Justifications of the humanities often employ a mythos that exceeds their historical dispositions and reach. This applies to justifications that appeal to an ‘idea’ of the humanities grounded in the cultivation of reason for its own sake. But the same problem affects more recent accounts that seek to shatter this idea by admitting an ‘event’ capable of dissolving and refounding the humanities in ‘being’. In offering a sketch of the emergence of the modern humanities from early modern humanism, the paper argues that these twin philosophical justifications fail to capture both the array of intellectual arts that have informed the humanities disciplines and the variety of uses to which these arts have been put. Nonetheless, the two philosophical constructions have had a concrete impact on the disposition of the modern humanities, seen in the respective structuralist and poststructuralist reconfigurations of the disciplines that began to take place under the banner of ‘theory’ during the 1960s. In discussing the effects of theory on the humanities in Australia, the paper focuses on the unforeseeable consequences of attempts to provide arts-based disciplines with a foundation either in cognitive structures or in an ‘event’ that shatters them.

Keywords: Humanities; disciplines; philology; philosophy; structuralism; poststructuralism.

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1. Introduction

Public addresses on the humanities typically invoke a mythos, seek to embody an ethos, and occasionally evoke pathos for their condition. This is no bad thing in itself. Not only are these respectable categories of Aristotelian rhetoric, but there may be no sharp break between the myths of the humanities and their history. Further, we will see that the humanities disciplines are indeed dependent on an ethos or *ethoi*, and that discussion of them is inseparable from the evocation of various kinds of emotion. Nonetheless, there is a pronounced tendency in such addresses for

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humanists to take a holiday from the best of current scholarship on the history of the disciplines, falling back on a purely justificatory mythos, or personifying a particular ethos with unreflective intensity.

Even if there is no sharp break between the mythos of the humanities and its history, we can still use historical scholarship to situate exemplary stories in the contexts of their use, thereby gradually establishing a detachment from them that makes them mythic, without necessarily destroying them. Similarly, in showing that knowledge in the humanities depends in varying ways on ethos, we will indeed be tying knowledge to the cultivation of particular kinds of intellectual comportment or persona, and this must also apply to the relation between historical knowledge and the persona of the historian. This does not mean however that there is no useable difference between the cultivation of a certain intellectual persona and the history of such forms of cultivation. We thus have little difficulty in distinguishing between Augustine of Hippo's cultivation of a Christian neo-Platonic spirituality and Peter Brown's elegant and learned histories of this particular form of cultivation. Finally, while there is no reason to attempt to purge discussions of the humanities of pathos, there might well be reasons to aspire to a greater selectivity and control of the emotions that we rhetorically evoke. Humanities academics often have their fingers on the rhetorical triggers of umbrage and indignation, although we can also reach for epiphany and exaltation. If however we recall the variety of emotions that the Stoic and Epicurean traditions have sought to evoke and master through their stories of suffering—if we think of the evocation of resolve or resignation associated with Stoic stories of tribulation and fate, or the evocation of metaphysical nonchalance associated with Epicurean stories of the insouciant gods—then we might get a sense of how narrow and uncontrolled the emotions evoked by the pathos of the humanities often are. I realise of course that I might provoke indignation by suggesting that humanities academics consider adding nonchalance to their emotional repertoire, even if it is associated with the birth of cool.

In this public address on the humanities I will not be attempting an historical outline of the disciplines, only to capture some of their historical dispositions—that is, their historical arrangements and comportments. This will involve us in an historical interrogation of some of the key mythologies of the humanities, including some of their exemplary personae or intellectual demeanours, and some of their characteristic emotional registers. But our history will be one that acknowledges its affinity with the mythologies it interrogates and the attitudes it distantiates, and this will require us to keep our cool.

2. The Humanities that Were

I will begin by discussing two exemplary histories of the humanities, both told by philosophers, and each symptomatic of a powerful intellectual ethos or persona, but of very different kinds. The first history is one that treats the humanities disciplines as grounded in a unifying idea—typically the idea of critical reason embedded in a conception of humanity—this giving rise to fundamental goods that the humanities as a body can deliver to society as a whole. Closely associated with the evocation of a sense of crisis and feelings of indignation, this story tells how the disinterested pursuit

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of reason and culture that was once embodied in the humanities has been betrayed by the instrumental yoking of university education to extrinsic economic and social interests.

An exemplary instance of this way of thinking about the humanities can be found in Martha Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Marrying a Kantian conception of reason to a Deweyan conception of the role of education, Nussbaum argues that education can be divided into that governed by national economic performance and that governed by the end of democratic citizenship. The former is technical and scientific and fails to educate citizens for democratic participation. Democratic citizenship requires an education in critical reason so that citizens can make informed decisions, and an education of the emotions to facilitate their empathetic relations with each other and the citizens of other nations. Co-opting Newman’s ‘idea of a university’, Nussbaum argues that only the humanities—the liberal arts, history, literature and the arts—can provide this education of reason and the emotions and ultimately the ‘soul’ required by rational citizenship, thereby staving off collapse into a purely technocratic education and illiberal economistic society. Nussbaum further claims that among the humanities disciplines it is philosophy, mythopoeically descended from Socrates, that has had the privileged role in the education of critical reason; so she recommends that all colleges and universities should require students to take at least two semesters of philosophy.

It turns out that it is very difficult to reconcile Nussbaum’s account of the idea of the humanities and its technocratic betrayal with the history of the humanities disciplines and their shifting dispositions and uses. Despite various disagreements about the details, there is a significant scholarly consensus that the antecedents of the modern humanities lie not in Socratic philosophy but in Renaissance humanism. It was the early modern humanists who first coined the phrase *studia humanitatis*—studies of human things—to characterise the parent disciplines of the modern humanities. Moreover, they did so to distinguish humanistic learning not from technocratic sciences but from scholastic theology, or the *studium divinitatis*, as part of a variegated pedagogical programme centred on the recovery and transmission of ancient texts and learning. This is a pointer to a very different genealogy for the humanities from that envisaged by their nineteenth-century idea.

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5 For a more general argument on the difficulty of maintaining any ‘idea’ of the university or the humanities in the face of their variegated history, see Jeffrey J. Williams, ‘History as a Challenge to the Idea of the University’, *JAC: A Journal of Rhetoric, Culture, & Politics*, 25 (2005), 55–74.
Contra Nussbaum, the humanities of the humanists neither consisted of philosophy nor were based in a philosophy descended from Socrates. In the words of its leading twentieth-century historian:

Renaissance humanism was not as such a philosophical tendency or system, but rather a cultural and educational programme which emphasized and developed an important but limited area of studies. This area had for its center a group of subjects that was concerned essentially neither with the classics nor with philosophy, but might be roughly described as literature.8

In fact the humanities of the humanists were focused in a small group of literate arts—grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, poetry, history and ethics—and these arts were principally engaged with the recovery of various kinds of ancient learning and placing them at the disposal of the cultural and political elites of early modern polities.9

It is thus a significant misunderstanding of the early modern humanities to imagine that they were centred in the cultivation of reason or the soul ‘for its own sake’, hence to view them as disinterested in Newman’s (and Nussbaum’s) sense of transcending practical social, economic and political ends. In the first place, while the care of the soul was among the recovered ancient teachings, this consisted not in moral philosophy but in an array of arts—of dream interpretation, bodily care, and self-examination—governed by eminently practical ends: the government of oneself and the direction of others, the management of marriage, friendship, political clientalism, and so on.10 Secondly, the arts of the soul had no special privilege in relation to the other arts that the humanists recovered from ancient learning, which included the arts of mining and metallurgy, architecture and fortifications, poetry and painting, arithmetic and letter writing (ars dictaminis).11 Of particular importance were the political and diplomatic arts recovered and refunctioned by leading political humanists—Guicciardini, Machiavelli, Bruni—that were put to immediate instrumental use by the humanists themselves in their roles as political secretaries and advisers.12 Finally, while the texts of ancient philosophy did indeed figure prominently among those recovered by the humanists, they approached these texts not as philosophers in search of authoritative truth but as philologists intent on establishing their historical meaning, weeding out textual corruptions, and improving translations; even if in doing so they occasionally unsettled orthodox scholastic philosophy.13

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The picture that begins to emerge then is not that of a humanities founded in a timeless philosophical cultivation of reason or the soul as an ‘end in itself’, whose idea would be betrayed through technocratic harnessing to extrinsic ends. It seems rather that the humanities first emerged from an array of early modern literary and historical arts driven by a cultural-pedagogical programme of recovering ancient learning for a wide array of practical ends. While there is no line of continuous development linking the early modern studia humanitatis to the modern humanities, and while the latter were significantly imprinted by nineteenth-century philosophical humanism and the emergence of the human sciences, Renaissance humanism nonetheless made two enduring contributions to the modern humanities: a contextualist, philologically informed style of historiography; and an array of practices of self-cultivation grounded in the reading of exemplary texts.14

Nussbaum’s conception of a philosophically centred humanities founded in the notion of reason or ‘rational being’ as an ‘end in itself’ arrived relatively late in the history of the disciplines—at the end of the eighteenth century—and emerged through a particular work of abstraction performed on them. Far from always being central to the humanities, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries philosophy in the narrow modern sense—as logic, ethics and metaphysics—was not generally taught in the arts faculty, being reserved for the higher faculty of theology where it was restricted to varieties of scholastic Aristotelianism, pre-eminently Thomism.15 Moreover, when philosophy in the form of metaphysics did begin to play a significant role in the arts faculties, patchily at first, during the latter part of the sixteenth century, this was not due to the expanded cultivation of critical reason, but to something else altogether: namely, the building of confessionally specific universities in which the arts faculty was required to teach a metaphysical philosophy suited to a particular confessional theology.16 The counter-reformation Jesuit universities proved to be the trendsetters in this regard, pushing the teaching of the liberal arts down into academic grammar schools, and consecrating the university arts faculty—renamed as the philosophy faculty—to a three-year course in Aristotelian logic, ethics and metaphysics.17


15 See Olaf Pederson, ‘Tradition and Innovation’, in A History of the University in Europe, edited by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens and Walter Rüegg, 4 vols (Cambridge, 1996–2011), II, 452–88; Naüert, Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe, 9–10. Philosophy in the broad early modern sense—which included the liberal arts, natural philosophy (‘physics’), metaphysics, astronomy, economics, poetics, and politics—was taught in arts faculties to varying degrees, but that is because philosophy in this sense was another name for the curriculum of the arts faculty itself. For this broader sense of philosophy and its dependence on the Aristotelian corpus as a repository for the arts curriculum, see Joseph S. Freedman, ‘Aristotle and the Content of Philosophy Instruction at Central European Schools and Universities during the Reformation Era (1500–1650)’, Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 137 (1993), 213–53.


17 See the diagram of the curriculum of the Jesuit College of Bamberg (1646/7) presented in Freedman, ‘Aristotle and the Content of Philosophy Instruction’, 244.
was taught in the Thomistic manner as preparation for a four-year theology course that was based on Aquinas’s *Summa theologica*. Driven by confessional competition, Lutheran universities began to readmit metaphysics to their arts faculties from the early seventeenth century, principally to provide a philosophical defence of their highly metaphysical theological confession, the Formula of Concord (1577), although this return of metaphysics was bitterly resisted by the pietistic wing of Lutheranism. This situation gave rise to a full-blooded but permanently embattled Protestant scholasticism.

Let us conjecture then that the origins of Nussbaum’s modern philosophy-centred conception of the humanities lie in the early modern confessional university. This formed the context for the rivalry between the humanists’ ‘philological’ or erudite conception of knowledge as the product of learned arts and *copia*, and the metaphysical conception of knowledge as grounded in principles and processes intrinsic to the human mind in its dual relation to divine intellection and the cosmos. Further, it is in these metaphysical discussions of human and divine intellection that we first encounter the notion of the cultivation of reason as an ‘end in itself’, initially restricted though to the divine mind whose freedom from materiality means that it has no external ends and, as ‘rational being’, wills only its own intellections. This suggests that if we restrict the meaning of ‘philosophy’ to reflection on the principles and processes by which the human mind accedes to knowledge of the world—or to ontological participation in being—then we are restricting it to a theo-rational hence theocentric form. It certainly seems that the conception of human knowledge as unified by and grounded in intrinsic principles and processes of the mind derives from the idea that there is a singular source of all thinkable things: namely the divine mind’s intellection of them.

This idea remains central to Kant’s metaphysics, even if he transposed the notion of divine intellection into the register of an ‘idea of reason’ rather than an object of understanding. In preserving the idea of the divine mind as the source of all thinkable things, namely the divine mind’s intellection of them.

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23 For a characteristic presentation of this standard conception of the divinity’s rational being as an end in itself—and as the only end in itself—see Christoph Scheibler, *Opus metaphysicum, duobus libris universum hujus scientiae systema comprehendens* (Giessen, 1617), book II, 542–46, 559–63.
things in this new register, Kant’s aim was to deploy it as a means of regulating the conduct of the philosophical intellect, even if it could no longer be an object of knowledge. Governed by this idea, the philosopher should never rest content with a horizontal plurality of ‘arts’-based knowledges, but should seek their unity and foundation in ever-higher forms of philosophical abstraction and principle, ascribing the latter to something called the ‘human mind’ as the forms of its orientation towards divine intellecction.\footnote{Immanuel Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN, 1996), A642/B670–A704/B732.} So too in construing human reason as an end in itself, and thereby seeking to place it beyond all end-directed (‘instrumental’) rationality, Kant may be regarded as transposing the metaphysical theology of divine rational being as an end itself into the register of human being, giving rise to a metaphysical humanism. What Kant calls ‘humanity’ is thus not something identical to man and opposed to God, but is rather regarded as something ‘in’ man yet distinct from him, possessing several of God’s key attributes.\footnote{Compare the following passages from Kant’s Vigilantius ethics lecture: ‘A man cannot dispose over his own substance, for he would then himself be master over his very personality, his \textit{inner freedom}, or humanity in his own person. These, however, do not belong to him; he belongs to them, and as phenomenon is obligated to the noumenon’. And: ‘Personhood, or humanity in my person, is conceived as an intelligible substance, the seat of all concepts, that which distinguishes man in his freedom from all objects under whose jurisdiction he stands in his visible nature. It is thought of, therefore, as a subject that is destined to give moral laws to man, and determine him: as occupant of the body, to whose jurisdiction the control of all man’s powers is subordinated’; see Immanuel Kant, \textit{Lectures on Ethics}, edited by Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind, translated by Peter Heath (Cambridge, 1997), 348, 369.}

Given this roughly sketched genealogy it is no accident that Kant should be the first major figure to argue that, on account of its pursuit of truth for its own sake, the philosophy faculty is in fact superior to the supposedly higher faculties of law, medicine and theology, where knowledge is governed by interests extrinsic to man’s ‘rational being’.\footnote{Immanuel Kant, \textit{The Conflict of the Faculties}, in \textit{Religion and Rational Theology}, edited by Alan W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge, 1996), 233–328 (247–62).} Further, Kant’s \textit{Conflict of the Faculties} and associated writings betray a shift from the humanist way of distinguishing the humanities—by contrasting them with theology—to a distinction that operates by contrasting the humanities with the sciences, the former being understood as disinterested and transcendental and the latter as instrumental and empirical or positive. This was the path taken by Dilthey in his construction of the human sciences as sciences of the mind (\textit{Geisteswissenschaften})—far removed from the humanities as voluntaristic arts of thinking—and that leads eventually to Nussbaum’s contrastive distinction between the humanities and the sciences.\footnote{Wilhelm Dilthey, \textit{Introduction to the Human Sciences: An Attempt to Lay a Foundation for the Study of Society and History}, translated by Ramon J. Betanzos (London, 1988), 145–48. On the voluntaristic—willed, decisionistic—dimension of the disciplines, see the suggestive discussion in Bas C. van Fraassen, \textit{The Empirical Stance} (New Haven, CT, 2002), 64–110.}

We may thus regard the conception of the humanities in terms of their transcendental disinterestedness as a ‘secularised’ theocentric philosophical construction that has been projected backwards onto early modern humanism and forwards onto the modern humanities. This mythos of a foundational status for the humanities grounded in the philosophical pursuit of truth for its own sake is by no means simply false, however; it plays a concrete role in imbuing the humanities with a disposition and self-understanding that supports a particular curricular role for them. Nussbaum’s mobilisation of this mythos is thus best seen in the context of the
general education programmes found in the elite liberal arts colleges of the United States. Here it supplies the general education curriculum with a maximal rationale and justification—in terms of the cultivation of a non-specialist disinterested reason and cosmopolitan openness of feeling—even if, as Louis Menand has argued, these programmes were grounded in the far from disinterested objectives of cultural assimilation and citizenship education.28 Taken in its Kantian form, the notion that all the disciplines are ultimately grounded in transcendental reason might also be responsible for maintaining a latent theocentrism within an ostensibly secular philosophical culture.

3. The Humanities to Come

Rather than being the work of a scholar on sabbatical from his disciplinary expertise, the mythos and ethos presented in our second exemplary account of the humanities—Jacques Derrida’s essay ‘The University without Condition’—emerges from the heart of his home discipline, Heideggerian philosophical hermeneutics. This results in an intensely academic discourse that is not intended for a general public, perhaps not even an educated one; although it was presented at Stanford University in 1999 in the university’s Presidential Lecture Series.

Perhaps in deference to his American audience, Derrida begins by invoking what his conception of a ‘new Humanities’ or a ‘Humanities to come’ shares with a conception that he calls ‘classical modern’ and identifies with Kant. He thus initially construes his theme of the unconditionality of the humanities in terms of the unconditional freedom to criticise and resist all attempts to tie the university to extrinsic economic interests. Moreover in opposing the humanities to the sciences—which he treats as captive to such interests—and in naming philosophy as their central discipline, Derrida indeed situates his discussion within the modern mythos of a philosophical humanities that runs from Newman to Nussbaum.29 Derrida too thus thinks that all the humanistic disciplines are ultimately grounded in man’s relation to the world or ‘being’, making them accessible to a unifying philosophical reflection, and precluding the best available historical understanding of them: as a scatter of literate and historical arts to which philosophy was a relative latecomer.

When it comes to the particular kind of philosophical reflection that will be used to ground the humanities, however, then Derrida does indeed differ from Nussbaum and the tradition of Kantian philosophical critique. Re-enacting Heidegger’s self-founding repudiation of Kantianism, Derrida declares that it is not critique that grounds the humanities but a philosophical operation that he characterises as ‘more than critical’, namely, deconstruction. So critical is deconstruction that it criticises ‘the traditional idea of critique, meaning theoretical critique’; and so questioning is it that it questions ‘the authority of the “question” form, of thinking as “questioning”’.30 Initially quite guarded about what it would mean for a philosophy to be

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29 Jacques Derrida, ‘The University without Condition’, in *Without Alibi*, edited and translated by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA, 2002), 202–37 (202–09, 229). Compare with the following: “‘Philosophy’ names here both a discipline that belongs to the “humanities” and that discipline which claims to think, elaborate and criticize the axiomatic of the “humanities””; see Jacques Derrida, ‘Of the Humanities and the Discipline of Philosophy’, *Surfaces*, 4 (1994), 5–21 (5).
‘more than critical’ and to question questioning, Derrida does provide a pointer in a footnote appended to the comments just quoted. Here he characterises the questioning of questioning as a particular disposition or comportment—we might say ethos or persona—namely, that of a ‘preroginary acquiescence that...remains presupposed by any interrogation...first of all, at the very origin of philosophy’.31 For all of its unfamiliarity to the uninitiated, the notion of an attitude that is so critical that it results in acquiescence will be quite familiar to readers of Heidegger. In *Being and Time* Heidegger invents and baptises this condition as *Befindlichkeit*, a state of attunement to being, or ‘disclosive submission to the world’, into which humans (*Dasein*) are supposed to find themselves ‘thrown’ prior to all theoretical cognition:

> Attunement [*Befindlichkeit*] not only discloses Dasein in its thrownness and submission to the world that is already disclosed with Dasein’s being, but is itself the existential mode of being in which Dasein constantly surrenders to the ‘world’, letting the world concern it in a way that somehow evades Dasein’s very self.32

This comportment is shaped by the suspension of all categorial conditions of knowledge in order to achieve a state of attunement not to an object of knowledge but to something that will happen. This something will arrive in a form—that of the ‘event’—that will existentially transform the being to whom it occurs, by taking them beyond the entire categorial structure of all existing subjectivity and knowledge.33 In other words, in place of the model of Kantian critique—in which the subject achieves critical insight into the transcendental categories of its own experience—Heidegger imposes a conception of philosophy in which the subject submits to an event that dissolves its experiential categories, hence its subjecthood, in order to open it to ecstatic being. Derrida’s ‘preroginary acquiescence’ that is ‘more than critical’ is thus a transposition of Heidegger’s attunement to the event, and it is this notion of the event—a spiritually transformative occurrence that breaks through the subjective conditions of possible experience—that grounds Derrida’s conception of the ‘unconditional humanities’.

Perhaps the central defining characteristic of Derrida’s writing and practice of philosophy is the fluidity with which he transposes Heidegger’s esoteric metaphysics into a plurality of exoteric forms. The latter operate at varying metaphorical distances from the philosophical core and are thus accessible to readers with differing degrees or kinds of philosophical training. In an earlier essay on the university Derrida thus presents Heidegger’s esoteric conception of the reciprocity between theoretical cognition and ontological ignorance in an almost wholly metaphorical manner, by dramatising a play between theoretical ‘vision’ and ‘deafness’ to the ‘call’ of being, which can only be heard by ‘blinking’ or closing the Kantian subject’s theoretical ‘eyes’.34 Alternatively, Derrida can present this Heideggerian doctrine in a more

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33 Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 56–58.
philosophical register, but one that is accessible to audiences trained in analytic rather than phenomenological philosophy, which is the strategy he employs in the later ‘University without Condition’ address. Here he covertly superimposes J. L. Austin’s pairing of constative and performative speech acts over Heidegger’s pairing of theoretical knowledge and ontological ignorance, producing something akin to a conversion discourse.

Needless to say, this gives rise to philosophical effects undreamt of by Austin. We can recall that Austin differentiates constative from performative speech acts by treating the former as statements about independently existing objects of knowledge, and the latter acts as ones that bring about their object, as in acts of marriage and so on. 35 Unlike Austin, though, Derrida identifies the constative mode with theoretical cognition tout court and treats it as if it were a reified by-product of the performative whose operations it occludes. In a move that owes nothing to Austin and everything to Heidegger, Derrida then superimposes the constative-performative couple on the (theological) pairing of knowledge and faith, treating the performative as a profession of faith that brings about objects of knowledge: ‘A profession of faith, a commitment, a promise, an assumed responsibility, all that calls not upon discourses of knowledge but upon performative discourses that produce the event of which they speak’. He characterises this profession of faith as a commitment and a taking responsibility through which a ‘professoriat’ brings objects into being as ‘works’. 36

Derrida wants to do two things with this Heideggerian reworking of Austin’s performative-constative couple. First, he wants to declare that since all objects of cognition are products of a performative profession, then all forms of knowledge—the sciences included—are touched by the element of fiction or fable that accompanies the performative. This means that all objects of knowledge exist in the register of the ‘as if’: that is, are known not as such (objectively, cognitively) but only ‘as if’ they are such. 37 This idea or attitude derives directly from Heidegger’s account of ‘being-in-the-world’ and is bound to his construction of the hermeneutic circle. On the one hand, says Heidegger, man or Dasein projects the ‘significance’ of the world by encountering its entities as ‘equipment’ for his own dwelling in it, thereby establishing the web of relations in which their significance consists, hence knowing them not as neutral objects of cognition but only ‘as’ objects of his concern. 38 On the other hand, though, man finds that the web of relations that constitutes the significance of the world is ‘always already’ in place, and ‘has already been disclosed beforehand’ as the condition of man concerning himself with these entities in the first place. 39 In fact man is supposed to find himself ‘thrown’ into this web of relations of being with no idea where from, since being projects man (Dasein) as the ‘there’ where it will be known in the condition of attunement to itself. 40 This means that the interpretation through which man projects the significance of being-in-the-world is circularly regarded as the effect of a being that throws man into the world imbued with a ‘foreknowledge’ of this significance that ‘has already been disclosed beforehand’. 41

38 Heidegger, Being and Time, 95–102, 188–89.
39 Heidegger, Being and Time, 106–07.
40 Heidegger, Being and Time, 172–79.
41 Heidegger, Being and Time, 190–95.
Since this circle is supposed to be the inescapable effect of man’s way of being in
the world, and since it applies to all of the entities man can encounter there, then
Heidegger thence Derrida treat all objects of knowledge—humanistic, technical,
scientific—as emerging from the single interpretive circle between projection and
thrownness. As a result of their metaphysical enclosure within the hermeneutic circle
the arts of thinking and instruments of knowledge are shorn of their technical
specificity and historical diversity, being treated instead as instances of an underlying
philosophical process—a paradigm, problematic, or discourse—hence as accessible
through a single mode or philosophical-hermeneutic reflection. This was the mode of
reflection that surfaced as ‘theory’ and ‘poststructuralism’ in the Anglo-American
academy during the 1960s. Not only did this hermeneutic regimen promise theoretical
access to a wide array of scientific disciplines to intellectuals lacking any mastery of
their technical instruments and languages, but it allowed theory itself to colonise an
expanding array of formerly independent disciplines by treating them all as
‘discourses’ enacting the hermeneutic circle between projection and thrownness.
Poststructuralist theory thus consists in the hermeneutic disclosure of a discursive
magma from beneath (what it regards as) the congealed form of superficially solid
and distinct disciplines which it thereby deconstructs. This in turn is what Derrida
means by the ‘new Humanities’ but also by ‘theory’, the Americanism that finally he
was prepared to own:

This new concept of the Humanities, even as it remains faithful to its tradition,
should include law, ‘legal studies’, as well as what is called in this country
[America], where this formation originated, ‘theory’ (an original articulation of
literary theory, philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and so forth), but also,
of course, in all these places, deconstructive practices.42

The second thing that Derrida wants to do with this Heideggerian hermeneutic
reworking of the performative-constative couple is to prepare the reader for a
particular way of understanding or perhaps acceding to the ‘event’. Heidegger insists
that standard logic provides no way out of the hermeneutic circle, as the play between
projection and thrownness is actually man’s existential condition, his way of ‘being-
in-the-world’. What the circle can do, however, precisely by paralysing or suspending
categorial or theoretical cognition, is induce the condition of openness to being—
Heidegger’s ‘attunement’ and Gelassenheit, Derrida’s state of ‘preoriginary
acquiescence’—in which something can appear not in the form of an object of
knowledge but as an event. As an appearance that breaks through the (Kantian)
categorial conditions of knowledge, the event is supposed to be an occurrence that
transforms the individual existentially and personally, since his prior quotidian
identity as a subject was bound to the now-shattered conditions of knowledge. In
characterising the event as something that ‘arrives’, Derrida construes the revolu-
tionary renovation of the whole order of categorial theoretical knowledge in terms of
something (‘what’) or someone (‘who’) coming from somewhere else—from beyond
the conditions of subjective experience—hence by definition not accessible to
conceptual or theoretical knowledge. Moreover, he invokes this transformative
arrival undeterred by the scarifying example of the revolutionary someone for whose
arrival Heidegger waited in 1933, when the philosopher’s hermeneutic reduction of

empirical history reduced him to its plaything.\textsuperscript{43} Finally, to complete this radical reworking of the mythos and ethos of the humanities, Derrida declares that it is the humanities that permit an event or arrival that by arriving...by taking place or having place, revolutionizes, overturns, and puts to rout the very authority that is attached...in the university, in the Humanities, ...to knowledge, ...to the profession, ...to the putting to work, at least to the performative putting to work of the ‘as if’.\textsuperscript{44}

Perhaps the most difficult thing for an intellectual historian to understand regarding the rival Kantian and Heideggerian constructions of the humanities put forward by Nussbaum and Derrida is why so many academics feel compelled to commit themselves to one against the other. There are of course many who continue to hold that there is an idea of the university, thence of the humanities, the thinking of which retrieves the cultivation of reason ‘for its own sake’;\textsuperscript{45} but there would appear to be equally many who hold that the thinking of this idea is equivalent to the forgetting of being, re-attunement to which will shatter reason and its subject through the arrival of the event.\textsuperscript{46} Approached historically, however, the humanities are neither unified by their idea nor shattered by a being it occludes, since their history is that of open-ended assemblages of arts of thinking, methods of investigation, and practices of cultivation—assemblages that were initially concentrated in a small group of literary, linguistic and historical disciplines dedicated to the retrieval of ancient learning, but that have since been serially multiplied and continuously reconfigured as a result of transformations in their cultural and political contexts. This does not mean though that the Kantian and Heideggerian construals of the humanities are simply false in relation to the facts of history. Such philosophical constructions are themselves real historical activities capable of reconfiguring the humanities, as we noted in our brief genealogy of the reconstitution of confessionalised arts faculties around a notion of philosophical intellection as opposed to philological erudition.

In order to understand the purchase of the Kantian and Heideggerian philosophies of the humanities, then, we must approach them as concrete historical activities capable of reconfiguring the humanities in their own images. They do this

\textsuperscript{43} Compare Heidegger’s 1933 letter to Elisabeth Blochmann, written two months after Hitler’s appointment as German chancellor, in which he treats the ‘dark and unbridled’ character of the ‘present situation’ as something that ‘heightens the will and the certainty to act in the service of a great task and to participate in the building of a world grounded on the people’. Commenting that the exhaustion of culture and values has ‘caused me to seek the new basis in Da-sein’, he continues: ‘We can discover it, as well as the vocation of the Germans, in the history of the West only if we expose ourselves to being itself...’, which means that ‘I experience what is presently happening completely from the future’. See Martin Heidegger to Elisabeth Blochmann, 30 March 1933, in ‘Selected Letters from the Heidegger-Blochmann Correspondence’, in \textit{Heidegger and the Political}, edited by Marcus Brainard, David Jacobs and Rick Lee (New York, NY, 1991), 559–80 (570). Also published as \textit{Heidegger and the Political}, edited by Marcus Brainard (\textit{Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal}, 14–15 [1991], 559–80).

\textsuperscript{44} Derrida, ‘The University without Condition’, in \textit{Without Alibi}, 233.


through operations performed in three associated registers. Firstly, through their rival philosophical anthropologies—man as a rational being who thinks his own conditions of experience versus man as a ‘thrown’ being whose knowledge of the world means forgetting how he got there—the two philosophies organise different regimes of cultivation that permit intellectuals to relate to themselves as philosophers, and to shape a particular kind of philosophical comportment or persona.47 Second, in fashioning these inner dispositions intellectuals also acquire the will and the capacity to reconfigure the dispositions of the humanities disciplines. In short, they learn to treat the disciplines either as so many empirical manifestations of higher-level a-priori rational laws recovered through philosophical reflection, or as so many ossified theories through which man has ‘fallen’ away from authentic being and that will be shattered through being’s ecstatic recovery. Third, since these conflicting ways of configuring them are grounded not in the humanities disciplines themselves, but in acts of abstraction performed on them in practices for cultivating (rival) philosophical personae, then we must look for the plausibility and power of these configurations elsewhere than in their truth to some objective state of affairs. I suggest that this plausibility and power can be found in part in the role of philosophies of the humanities in configuring them for transmission in elite educational institutions. Nussbaum’s Deweyan-Kantian image of the humanities as the conduit of universal reason thus finds its anchorage in the general education programmes of the elite American liberal arts college,48 while the original home of Derrida’s Heideggerian configuration was in the grooming of philosophical intellectuals in the French École normale supérieure, even if later transposed to the American Ivy League.49 At the same time, we should not ignore the power arising from the cultivation of these prestigious intellectual personae themselves, a power that perhaps flows from theosophical sources to which philosophers maintain a tacit link either through the notion of divine intellection as an ‘idea of reason’ or through the notion that to think this idea is to forget being. These at least are the conjectures that will govern the next stage of our discussion.

4. The Post-Sixties Humanities in Australia

The last significant reconfiguration of the humanities in Australia began in the late 1960s and continues to shape their current dispositions. This transformation was driven by two cultural-political developments whose sources were international but whose local reception was distinctive. The first of these developments was the arrival of ‘theory’. This occurred in two waves that, despite the philosophical differences between them, tended to flow together when they reached Australian shores. Flagged as structuralism, the first wave flowed from the historical logic of nineteenth- and twentieth-century neo-Kantianism. Carried along in this current, Kant’s a-priori structuring of the human mind had been pluralised and historicised, through its

48 As argued in Menand, Marketplace of Ideas, 23–57.
transposition into the register of formal mathematics and the calculus, the philosophy of symbolic forms, and linguistic and semiotic systems. In Australia this wave crested in the uptake of Chomskyan and Saussurian linguistics, whose reception was driven not by their empirical use—for example, in describing and preserving Aboriginal languages—but by their role in a neo-Kantian reconfiguring of the humanities. Overwhelmingly, Australian academics read Chomsky and Saussure not to find out about the structure of language but to absorb an anti-empiricist philosophical outlook: namely, that since linguistic and semiotic systems are manifestations of a-priori rules, knowledge of them cannot be based in mere empirical experience and use—as if languages were historical artefacts—and must be looked for instead in the structure of the human mind. This is what allowed linguistic and semiotic systems to take over the central attributes of the Kantian mind: to become the sources of all that could be thought and known prior to any empirical experience or learning, hence to be invested with a certain ideology of creativity and freedom. Similarly, by modelling analysis of myths on a Kantianised linguistics, Levi-Strauss could treat their regular patterns as manifestations of common underlying structures of the mind, thereby subverting the philological study of them as learned formulas associated with oral composition. In short, if for a certain period—perhaps from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s—many Australian humanities academics were prepared to say that their objects of knowledge were ‘structured like a language’, this was due to the way in which they transformed their own intellectual comportments by learning to view themselves as retrieving the transcendental structures of experience.

The second wave of theory—that we have already encountered in the form of Derrida’s deconstruction of the humanities—had arisen from the post-war French reception of Martin Heidegger’s anti-Kantian metaphysics and arrived in Australia under the flag of poststructuralism. Heidegger’s metaphysics had been acculturated

\[51\] For specialist studies on Chomsky’s neo-Kantianism, see Pietro Perconti, Kantian Linguistics: Theories of Mental Representation and the Linguistic Transformation of Kantism (Münster, 1999); Terence Charles Williams, Kant’s Philosophy of Language: Chomsyke Linguistics and its Kantian Roots (New York, NY, 1993). For some initial steps towards a parallel analysis of Saussure, see Robin M. Muller, ‘Kant and Saussure’, Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio, 3 (2010), 130–46.
\[52\] One of the best accounts of the key role of Kantian transcendental reflection in the emergence of linguistics as a ‘science of man’ remains that given in Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York, NY, 1971), 303–43.
\[53\] For an informative account of what it was about Chomsky’s formal syntactic calculus that allowed this kind of ‘psychological’ interpretation, see Geoffrey J. Huck and John A. Goldsmith, Ideology and Linguistic Theory: Noam Chomsky and the Deep Structure Debates (London, 1995).
\[54\] For a powerful philological exemplification and defence of the investigation of myth patterns in terms of the formulas used in oral composition—one that carries forward the classic studies by Milman Parry and Albert Lord—see David E. Bynum, The Daemon in the Wood: A Study of Oral Narrative Patterns (Cambridge, MA, 1978).
to French existentialism and phenomenology, and thence transmitted into an array of humanities disciplines via its uptake in the work of such writers as Althusser, Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, de Certeau and, to a certain extent, Foucault. If, despite the mutual hostility of their neo-Kantian and Heideggerian sources, the two waves of theory initially flowed together in the Australian humanities, this was in part because of a lack of interest in the sources, but also because, seen from a distance, they both seemed to offer a similar transcendental-philosophical reconfiguration of the arts disciplines. The French poststructuralist writers were thus not received in the Australian humanities as philosophers but, like the structuralists, as ‘theorists’ embedded in a variety of humanities disciplines which they sought to reconfigure. This was in part because the exoteric or ‘literary’ reworking of Heideggerian themes by the French writers had already permitted this philosophy to migrate to an array of adjacent disciplines; and it was in part due to the fact that in the 1960s, Australian philosophy departments were largely dominated by an anti-phenomenological analytic philosophy. Underlying both of these factors, though, was the fact that the reception of poststructuralism depended on and was driven by the cultivation of a prestigious intellectual comportment: namely, that of the intellectual who, by withdrawing from (Kantian) cognitive mastery, could attune himself to the transformative event in which being disclosed itself in ecstatic awareness. For these reasons, the initial reception of poststructuralist theory in the Australian humanities was in English departments (as literary theory), departments of French and modern languages (as phenomenological criticism and semiotics), and at the margins of philosophy departments; and, unlike its French emergence, it appeared first not in the established institutions but in an array of newer experimental universities.

56 The question of whether or to what extent this broader reception was preceded and facilitated by an earlier reception of ‘continental’ philosophy—namely that associated with the work of William Boyce-Gibson (1869–1935)—remains to be investigated. Boyce-Gibson was a cosmopolitan (born in Paris, educated in Oxford and Jena) who took up a chair in idealist philosophy at the University of Melbourne in 1912, but then developed an interest in phenomenology in the 1920s, travelling to Freiburg to meet Husserl and Heidegger in 1928, and translating the former’s Ideen zu einer reinen Pha¨ nomenologie und pha¨ nomenologischen Philosophie in 1931. Whatever Boyce-Gibson’s inter-war influence might have been, it does not seem to have survived the post-war rise of ordinary-language and analytic philosophy, as the first recorded Australian collection dedicated to phenomenological philosophy during the 1960s—Ten Lectures on Continental Philosophy, edited by Catherine Berry and published by the Melbourne University Philosophical Society in 1962—was a student undertaking, whose authors were drawn from the departments of French, German and Theology as well as philosophy. For a rare and illuminating discussion of some of these issues, see Maurita Harney, ‘The Contemporary European Tradition in Australian Philosophy’, in Essays on Philosophy in Australia, edited by Jan T. J. Srzednicki and David Wood (Dordrecht, 2010), 122–48.

57 When in the 1970s there was an attempt to introduce Althusserian, Derridean, Foucaultian and feminist currents into a major Australian analytic philosophy department—at the University of Sydney—it fractured into two departments.

58 In Australia, as elsewhere, the cultivation of this persona and the presentation of Heidegger’s self-disclosure being have been undertaken in a variety of more or less exotic ways. In Elizabeth Grosz’s ‘corporeal’ feminist theory, for example, it is attunement to the body that promises to open the intellectual to an ecstatic yet unthinkable encounter with being. In Kevin Hart’s deconstructive negative theology, man encounters his thrownness in the ‘trespass of the sign’; that is, in a sign that points towards the being from which man has emanated by showing that such a being can never be signified or made ‘present to consciousness’. In other words, the ‘thinking body’ and the ‘trespass of the sign’ may be viewed as the instruments and effects of the cultivation of a Heideggerian philosophical persona. See Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism (Bloomington, IN, 1994), 3–26; Kevin Hart, The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy (New York, NY, 1989), 3–39.

Beginning earlier and drawing on quite different cultural and intellectual sources, but then converging (somewhat coincidentally) with the arrival of the two waves of theory, the second development that transformed the Australian humanities in the late 1960s was the rise of a certain kind of social history and an associated style of social theory. This was a social history that defined itself against existing forms of diplomatic, military, economic, constitutional and political history, which it regarded as written from the standpoint of the ruling class, the state, or the empire. Broadly but not exclusively Marxist in its theoretical dimension, Australian social history portrayed society in terms of class oppositions while simultaneously locating a morally dynamic community—initially identified with working-class culture—latent within state and society and capable of transforming them ‘from below’, generally in accordance with the telos of retrieving a lost humanity or alienated consciousness. Among its founding texts were E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* (1958), in addition to the writings of Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm which displayed the affiliation between social history and labour history.

For these writers the working class’s retrieval of its alienated culture or consciousness functions as a telos that imbues their narratives with a progressive directionality. It also compels them to explain a series of failures or delays in the arrival of the promised day, which they do by treating an array of cultural institutions—religion, aesthetics, law, education—as the source of ideologies capable of imbuing a ‘false consciousness’ serving to maintain existing social relations. Humphrey McQueen’s *A New Britannia* thus tells the story of how the Australian working class failed to reach the telos of a radical socialist self-consciousness, detouring instead into racism and nationalism as the result of its co-option by ‘colonial capitalism’ and its betrayal by a reformist Labour Party. The proletariat was not the only avatar of this self-perfecting and potentially self-conscious collective personality, however, which found alternative incarnations in the intellectual class, women, youth, and subaltern postcolonial groups, particularly as knowledge spread of the genocidal acts carried out by the Soviet and Maoist states in the name of the working class. In the work of the social historian Henry Reynolds it is thus the Australian nation that plays the role of a self-developing moral community that might undo the dispossession and repression of the Aborigines carried out by the colonial state and judiciary, in which regard Reynolds is the inheritor of that great monument to Australian anti-imperial social history, Manning Clark’s *A History of Australia*.

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60 In Thompson’s work it is a combination of religion and education, in the form of the Methodist Sunday school, that serves the ends of bourgeois ideology, sublimating working-class desire for social transformation into otherworldly longing; see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 48–50, 350–400. That social history was never completely captured by this philosophical (Hegelian and Marxian) historiography is evident from works such as Thomas W. Laqueur’s *Religion and Respectability*, in which Thompson’s account was subject to corrosive empirical scrutiny; see Thomas W. Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working-Class Culture, 1780–1850* (New Haven, CT, 1976).


Owing to its own component of dialectical historicism, this form of social history was allied with those forms of Marxist social theory that employed dialectical materialism, as can be seen in the overlapping programmes of the History Workshop Journal and the more theoretical New Left Review during this period. In Australia this uneasy alliance defined the space occupied by the new-left journals Arena and Thesis Eleven. It proved much more difficult however to ally social history with the two waves of theory just discussed, especially with poststructuralism. This was centrally because social history remained indebted to a Hegelian conception of history as driven by contradictions whose overcoming will supposedly allow man to grasp the truth of his own historical formation and bring it under control. Poststructuralist theory though—including Louis Althusser’s Marxist variant—views history in terms of the irruption of being into time, taking place as a revolutionary event or ‘encounter’ that shatters the present without rendering it intelligible to man as a culminating development of his past. This genetic incompatibility between poststructuralist theory and all forms of dialectical social history was evident from the outset, as could be seen in the irresolvable conflicts between the British Althusserians—writing in the journals Theoretical Practice and (for a time) Economy and Society—and the History Workshop and New Left Review writers. Attempts to establish a modus vivendi between the two intellectual styles have only resulted in hybrids of social history and literary theory that have proved incapable of producing viable intellectual offspring.

It is now possible to conjecture that the constitutional incapacity of poststructuralist theory and dialectical social history to form a stable alliance capable of reconfiguring the Australian humanities has had two major effects that define their current dispositions. In the first place, it has meant that where theory and social history have been brought together this has resulted not in the birth of viable disciplines but in a series of hybrid ‘studies’. These hybrids—Cultural Studies, Women’s Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Legal Studies—are internally unstable and it is possible that they will not be able to reproduce themselves.

Australian Cultural Studies thus combined two quite different intellectual inheritances. On the one hand, from the Thompson-Williams style of social history

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63 For a symptomatic expression of the difficulties posed by this alliance, especially after the theoretical turn taken by the New Left Review in the later 1960s, see Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, who both welcome sociology into history as a source of ‘theory’, and as subversive of ‘narrowly political and constitutional historiography’, while simultaneously warning that a good deal of sociology might itself be unmasked as ‘bourgeois ideology’ by a properly constituted social history; Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, Sociology and History, History Workshop, 1 (1976), 6–8. For a discussion germane to this array of issues, see Simon During, ‘Socialist Ends: The British New Left, Cultural Studies and the Emergence of Academic “Theory”’, Postcolonial Studies, 10 (2007), 23–39.


66 For an Australian example, see Ann Curthoys and John Docker, Is History Fiction? (Sydney, 2005), especially chapter 9.


68 For a symptomatic expression of the difficulties posed by this alliance, especially after the theoretical turn taken by the New Left Review in the later 1960s, see Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, who both welcome sociology into history as a source of ‘theory’, and as subversive of ‘narrowly political and constitutional historiography’, while simultaneously warning that a good deal of sociology might itself be unmasked as ‘bourgeois ideology’ by a properly constituted social history; Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, Sociology and History, History Workshop, 1 (1976), 6–8. For a discussion germane to this array of issues, see Simon During, ‘Socialist Ends: The British New Left, Cultural Studies and the Emergence of Academic “Theory”’, Postcolonial Studies, 10 (2007), 23–39.
it borrowed the posit of a self-developing aesthetic culture latent in society and capable of transforming it from below.\textsuperscript{68} It then invested this possibility or hope in popular rather than high culture, posing Williams’s question of whether an aesthetic culture could be realised in society as a ‘whole’, and deploying social history’s ideology critique as a hermeneutic for determining which popular cultural forms might lead to this telos.\textsuperscript{69} On the other hand, from the two waves of theory, Cultural Studies admitted two modes of theorisation that would prove impossible to reconcile with its dialectical-historicist conception of culture and, indeed, with each other: a structuralist model of the text that relegates historical compositional forms in favour of atemporal ‘deep structure’,\textsuperscript{70} and a poststructuralist hermeneutics that views all cultural objects as projections of a ‘performative discursivity’ or as riven by antinomies and aporias arising from the hermeneutic circle.\textsuperscript{71} The optimistic 1980s programme that envisaged Cultural Studies emerging as a discipline through the dialectical reconciliation of these conflicting tendencies is now scarcely remembered.\textsuperscript{72} Instead, Cultural Studies finds itself oscillating between hermeneutic and descriptive methods—a nostalgic ideology critique and a tentative sociological empiricism—and shows signs of dissolving into independent literary, ethnographic, vocational, and policy studies.\textsuperscript{73} This poses the question of whether the similarly hybrid character of Postcolonial Studies, Women’s Studies and Legal Studies will mean that they will also find it impossible to stabilise themselves on the basis of the two forms of theory currently on offer in the humanities.

The second intellectual-historical outcome of the incompatibility between the movements of poststructuralist theory and social history has been divorce followed by separate development. In the case of social history this has permitted a turn (or return) to empirical forms of the discipline. These have quietly abandoned history ‘from below’, suspended theory, and pursued more contextually specific studies in which the ‘social’ refers to historically contingent institutional orders rather than a self-developing collective subject or redeemable moral community. This has served as a reminder that even during the heyday of Marxian historiography, non-dialectical styles of social history continued to flourish in such forms as demographic history, print history, regional and ‘micro’ histories, and the history of mentalities, whose


\textsuperscript{70} This was the agenda of the journals \textit{Screen} and \textit{Screen Education}, which were influential during the 1970s and 1980s.

\textsuperscript{71} See, in particular, Judith Butler’s various treatments of ‘discursive performativity’, most recently Judith Butler, \textit{Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex} (London, 2011), xi–xxx. For a typical instance of the theory of cultural objects emerging from the antinomies and aporia induced by the hermeneutic circle, see Justin Clemens, \textit{The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory: Institutions, Aesthetics, Nihilism} (Burlington, VT, 2003).

\textsuperscript{72} Again, see Hall, ‘Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms’.

\textsuperscript{73} Graeme Turner has recognised these threats to the longevity of the field, and proposes to produce stability by intensifying various forms of disciplinary training; see Graeme Turner, \textit{What’s Become of Cultural Studies?} (Los Angeles, CA, 2012). Tony Bennett and his collaborators have pursued a parallel path, undertaking major projects designed to realign Cultural Studies with the disciplines of cultural sociology and history, and the reformers’ objectives of cultural policy analysis; see in particular the programme outlined in Tony Bennett, \textit{Culture: A Reformer’s Science} (Sydney, 1998).
empirical methods have now resurfaced.74 The reopening of this space of empirical contextual historiography has permitted the return of an array of forms of history that tended to remain offstage during the period in which theory and ‘history from below’ were in the limelight. Diplomatic, legal, economic, constitutional and political history are thus returning to centre stage, bringing with them a recovery of the centrality of humanist philological methods and the Renaissance ‘revolution in historical thought’.75 This has in turn been accompanied by a renewed sense of the irreconcilability of metaphysical and historical approaches to humanistic knowledge, and supported by the persistence of contextual intellectual history in treating theory as an object of historical investigation rather than as a condition of historical knowledge.76

If the divorce of social history from theory has permitted a return of various forms of empirical or philological historiography, then it is much more difficult to provide an overview of what the separate development of poststructuralist theory looks like. This difficulty arises from a central characteristic that we have already noted: namely, that rather than being a discipline with its own objects of knowledge, theory is a philosophical action performed on adjacent disciplinary domains and positive knowledges, and on the way in which intellectuals comport themselves towards them. This action takes place in two stages. First, poststructuralist theory purports to offer a ‘history’ of the relevant disciplines while in fact performing a hermeneutic reading of them intended to show that disciplines are discourses whose objects are ossifications of performative projections.77 Second, as a result of the ‘aporias’ induced by this hermeneutic, disciplines can be brought into a crisis that is only escaped by cultivating attunement to an event whose arrival shatters the disciplinary conditions of knowledge and ecstatically transforms the theorist. While it is suited to inducing a sense of crisis within disciplines, and while it leads to the multiplication of charismatic hermeneuts attuned to transformative events, this intellectual operation is not suited to the transmission of teachable knowledge—beyond the teaching of the operation itself as a kind of spiritual exercise—and is not attuned to scholarly research. Perhaps this is why we might be seeing a certain exhaustion and mutation in the teaching of theory in some of America’s elite liberal arts universities.78 If as I have argued, however,

74 These non-dialectical forms of social history are associated with the work of such historians as Natalie Zemon Davis, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Anthony Grafton, Thomas W. Laqueur, and Carlo Ginzburg.
75 For a powerful discussion and exemplification of this recovery, see Anthony Grafton, ‘The Humanists Reassessed’, in Defenders of the Text, 1–22.
76 In fact this capacity to treat theoretical abstraction as an object of historical investigation rather than as a condition of it was there from early on, as we can see in this remarkable paper: J. G. A. Pocock, ‘The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Inquiry (1962)’, in Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method (Cambridge, 2009), 3–19.
77 See, for examples, After Poststructuralism: Writing the Intellectual History of Theory, edited by Tilottama Rajan and Michael J. O’Driscoll (Toronto, ON, 2002). Despite the promise of the subtitle, the authors eschew all attempts to provide an account of the sources, chronologies, contexts or genealogies of poststructuralist theory, offering instead a discussion of ‘performativities’ that ‘constitute a staging of certain hypothetical encounters in which theoretical subjects share the same dramatic space and are put into dialogue, regardless of chronology and influence’; see After Poststructuralism, edited by Rajan and O’Driscoll, 5.
78 A review of the current Harvard University course register thus seems to show that, on the one hand, poststructuralism is no longer a significant presence in the English department, whose offerings are predominantly period and genre courses; while, on the other hand, poststructuralism is taught within the philosophy department, but as philosophy rather than theory, and in the history department, but as an object of intellectual history. See Harvard University, ‘Courses of Instruction’, <http://www.registrar.fas.harvard.edu/courses-exams/courses-instruction> [accessed 14 March 2013].
poststructuralist theory is a devolved ‘existential’ form of the mainline of European university metaphysics—possessing a demonstrated power to reconfigure the philological humanities by treating them as instances of philosophical intellection—then it is wishful thinking to imagine that we are witnessing some kind of inevitable return to a humanities based on respect for the text, humanity, and reason.79 There is nothing inevitable about any return to concepts that are fundamentally historical and essentially contested.

5. Concluding Conjectures
Let me bring these reflections to a head and my address to a conclusion by drawing out three conjectures from the preceding discussion. First, we can suggest that in understanding the recent transformations of the humanities it might be necessary to take a more historical approach to how its disciplines are constituted, and a less philosophical view of how they undergo change. If, for example, we were to examine the three major forms of literary studies in the twentieth century—the philological, the ‘new critical’, and the phenomenological-theoretical—then their historical relations pose major problems for the two available philosophical-historical ways of understanding them: as Kuhnian paradigms, or as Derridean discourses. This is because it turns out that the manner in which these forms of textual study (partially) displaced each other resulted neither from the build-up of anomalous evidence at the borders of a paradigm precipitating a Kuhnian epistemological crisis nor from the arrival of an unconditioned Heideggerian event that shattered pre-existing conditions of theoretical cognition. Rather, these displacements occurred because each of these disciplines performed different operations on literary texts and their readers, and yet sought to occupy the same institutional and pedagogical space—the English department—which each attempted to capture and remake in its own image.80

When in the 1940s and 1950s the New Critics sought to displace historical philology they did so not by adducing evidence overlooked by the philologists, but by doing something different to and with literary texts. If we look at what the New Critics claimed the philologists had overlooked—namely the unity of literary form and content—this turns out to be less a feature of literary texts than a series of directives about how they should be read, directives that were in turn embedded in a particular ‘spiritual exercise’ and pedagogical relationship.81 In this relationship the student is required to paraphrase the meaning of a work that cannot be paraphrased, turning the reading into an exercise that displays a deficit in the reader’s own sensibility to the teacher, thereby prompting repeated returns to the impenetrable text.

79 For an example of such wishful thinking, see Harpham, ‘Beneath and Beyond the “Crisis in the Humanities”’.
80 Compare the illuminating parallel account in Catherine Gallagher, ‘The History of Literary Criticism’, Daedalus, 126(1) (1997), 133–53. Gallagher’s account differs from mine in treating the successive reconfigurations of literary studies as driven by a logic of professionalisation. Gallagher presents this logic as governed by the need to reconcile the functions of expert knowledge and public address, research and undergraduate teaching, although in doing so she is less concerned to describe the successive configurations of English than to provide a norm for reconfiguring its overly theoretical form in the 1990s.
81 This is something that I investigated earlier; see Ian Hunter, Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education (Basingstoke, 1988), 120–32; Ian Hunter, ‘History Lessons for “English”’, Cultural Studies, 8 (1994), 142–61.
and giving rise to the ‘close reading’. 82 Somewhat paradoxically, the intensity of new critical textual scrutiny is a reflex effect of an exercise in self-scrutiny designed to question and deepen the readers’ relation to themselves. Historical philology, however, operates by placing texts in an objectifying field formed by inquiries into the contexts of their use, the compositional techniques employed in them, their rhetorical forms and purposes, and so on. Rather than evidentiary differences, it was this difference in the uses to which literary texts could be put—and in the forms of comportment toward them—that was at stake in the attempted new critical takeover of English, since gathering evidence only pertains to historical philology.

If the New Critics were not justified in claiming that the philologists had overlooked the unity of form and content, however, then neither were phenomenologists and poststructuralists justified in claiming that the New Critics treated texts as quasi-empirical objects and thence failed to grasp the hermeneutic circle in which they are caught up. 83 According to Paul de Man’s phenomenological critique, the New Critics failed to grasp that the meaning of a work emerges from the circle between the reader’s projective interpretation of it and the sudden recognition that this projection is ‘always already’ present in a ‘prefigurative’ structure of meaning into which the reader is thrown. 84 This construction is not something that the New Critics could have misunderstood, however, as it was the means of forming an intellectual persona and comportment towards the text quite unlike the one that they cultivated: in fact the comportment of the Heideggerian philosophical hermeneut attuning himself to an impossible event of meaning.

In short, if the disciplines of literary study were not displaced in the manner of paradigms or discourses that is because they did not constitute transcendental conditions of existence for knowledge of their objects—not even historicised transcendentals as envisaged in Foucault’s ‘historical a prioris’ or Hacking’s ‘historical ontologies’. 85 Rather, they existed as ensembles of concrete ‘arts’—arts of thinking, reading, interpreting, contextualising, teaching, self-shaping—that issued not in a phenomenological ‘gaze’ or performative projection of the object, but in a plurality of concrete ways of relating to texts, performing operations on and with them, and thereby also acting in various ways on the self. Since the different disciplines of textual study exist not as modes of consciousness but as ensembles of instituted arts associated with different intellectual comportments, transitions between them did not occur as revolutionary ruptures or shattering events, but in

82 John Crowe Ransom thus argued that while it was an important aid to criticism, historical scholarship could never be an ‘end in itself’ or substitute for direct aesthetic engagement with the text, understood as a repeated confrontation with the text’s ineffable concreteness; see, John Crowe Ransom, ‘Criticism Inc.’, in 20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader, edited by David Lodge (London, 1972), 228–41.
84 Compare de Man’s declaration that ‘[l]iterary “form” is the result of the dialectic interplay between the prefigurative structure of foreknowledge and the intent at totality of the interpretative process. . . . The completed form never exists as a concrete aspect of the work . . . . It is constituted in the mind of the interpreter as the work discloses itself in response to his questioning’; see De Man, ‘Form and Intent’, in Blindness and Insight, 31–32.
the form of alterations in the institutional ensembles themselves. Here continuities were no less important than changes, and disciplines tended to continue jockeying within the same institutional space rather than supplanting each other as mutually exclusive paradigms.

For just this reason, the moments of supersession did not take place as total revolutionary ruptures but as institutional transformations characterised by continuities as well as breaks. Phenomenology and poststructuralism thus succeeded in displacing New Criticism not by retrieving a more fundamental ontology but by deploying their own version of the ‘close reading’. Since the hermeneutic circle compels ceaseless scrutiny of the text (for its ‘aporias’) no less efficiently than does the unity of form and content, the teaching of phenomenology and ‘theory’ could take over the corrective pedagogy of the close-reading seminar, reconfiguring it to target ‘empiricism’ understood as personal inauthenticity. For its part, philological criticism simply ignored its supposed supersessions, maintaining its presence not just as the source of critical editions but, more fundamentally, as the custodian of the methods of historical textual scholarship that had first permitted the humanities to constitute texts as objects of historical investigation.

My second conjecture is that in order to obtain an appropriately detached understanding of disciplines and disciplinary change it will be necessary to recover or perhaps simply reassert a form of objectivity that is distinctive to the humanities: namely, empirical historiography and contextual intellectual history in particular. Given poststructuralism’s hostility to all forms of historical objectivity—to the recovery of origins, the contextual determination of meaning, the narration of temporal chains, and anything else that blocks man’s ‘thrown’ attunement to being—it is clear that this reassertion will have to be directed against poststructuralist theorising, deconstruction in particular. At the same time, we have already suggested that in treating the disciplines as conditions of experience for empirical objects, a historised Kantianism has difficulty in approaching the disciplines themselves as objects of empirical investigation, that is, objectively. In reasserting the objectivity of the historical humanities in the face of an entrenched hermeneutic scepticism it will of course be necessary to free the term from its Heideggerian and Kantian constructions, where it is treated either as an alienated being or as an appearance structured by a-priori concepts. To this end we can turn to an array of recent studies in the history of philology and the history and philosophy of science. Here objectivity has been reconstructed as an array of historically formed intellectual comportments grounded in regional ‘subcultures’ or ways of intellectual life. The role of these subcultures is to train and equip intellectual or scientific conduct such that it will be

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87 For an overview of the empirical outlook as an objectifying comportment or stance—that is, not as a doctrine or mode of consciousness but as an historically formed way of conducting the self—see van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 31–63. A worked example of a particular scientific subculture is presented in Peter Galison, *Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics* (Chicago, IL, 1993). Stephen Gaukroger provides an illuminating account of the emergence of objectivity as a training of the judgement in the handling of evidence and argument that involves a reconstruction of the persona of the natural philosopher and the separation of objectivity from absolute truth; see Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity* 1210–1685 (Oxford, 2006). A different but not incompatible account is provided in Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).
sensitive to the evidentiary restraints imposed on it by the disposition of objects within an observational field opened by this training and equipping. Recent research—itself claiming to be objective in this restricted sense—has provided important insights into the emergence of an empirical history of philosophy from a particular intellectual subculture in early modern Germany.88 This subculture was formed at the nexus of three rather different developments: first, a cultural-political battle that was waged by Protestant humanists against metaphysics and natural theology, pre-eminently against Catholic scholastic metaphysics but also against Protestant scholasticism and the modern metaphysics of Spinoza and Descartes;89 second, the rise of a powerfully anti-metaphysical fideistic Pietism whose stress on the corruption of man’s faculties at the Fall—ruining his access to the divine mind—was an important contributor to the kind of probabilistic empirical outlook that fed into early-modern eclecticism;90 and third, the deployment of methods of textual analysis drawn from humanist philology, legal hermeneutics, and biblical criticism, all of which viewed texts as records of purely human activities, the decipherment of which depends on accurate dating, the impartial exposure of corrupt versions, and historical investigation of contextual uses and receptions.91 If we consider the way in which this subculture precluded speculative readings of philosophical and theological texts—as earthly manifestations of transcendent intellection—while simultaneously treating them as documents bearing evidences of particular historical origins, compositional techniques, and rhetorical uses, then we can begin to see the emergence of a history of philosophy that was objective in the sense that it presumed an intellectual conduct capable of being restrained by such evidences.

In treating texts as documenting concrete intellectual activities, to be deciphered through investigation of their contexts of composition, use, and reception, modern contextual intellectual history may be regarded as an inheritor of this early modern subculture.92 In the course of making my own claim on this inheritance in the present paper, I have attempted to outline how poststructuralist theory—Derrida’s deconstruction in particular—may be situated in an empirical intellectual history that aspires to objectivity in the relevant sense. In doing so I have begun to present evidence regarding the historical origin of poststructuralism (in Heidegger’s anti-Kantian metaphysics); the contexts of its use (in the academy as a means of bringing adjacent disciplines into cognitive crisis); and the character of some of its receptions (in the grooming of academic elites in France and America, in the transformation of

the Australian humanities academy). Above all though I have attempted to show how poststructuralist theory may be described as a concrete intellectual activity or subculture. This is centred in a spiritual exercise for suspending acceptance of empirical knowledges and cultivating a condition of attunement to an event whose arrival will transform the one to whom it occurs through a glimpse of the being from whence it has been thrown. In other words, rather than aiming to form an intellectual comportment capable of being constrained by historical-philological evidence, poststructuralism is centred in an act of self-transformation that requires such evidentiary constraint be treated as symptomatic of personal inauthenticity and the ‘forgetting of being’.

This leads to my final and least-settled conjecture, which can be put in the form of a question: how should we view the relation between the empirical history of philosophy and the two philosophies of the humanities with which we began? I have already indicated how an historical approach to the disciplines deals with Nussbaum’s justificatory mythos, and how it differs from the Kantian view of them as transcendental paradigms. In concluding, though, I want to concentrate on the relation between this empirical history of philosophy and poststructuralist theory, for this brings into focus an important and unresolved cultural-political problem: namely, how we should view the repudiation of fallibilistic objectivity in the poststructuralist humanities.

Derrida’s declaration that deconstruction ‘is not a method, a doctrine, a speculative metaphilosophy, but what arrives, what comes about…’ poses this problem in an acute but typical manner.93 Here Derrida draws on Heidegger’s conception of philosophy as a conduit for the existential disclosure of being in man, and of truth as the spiritual condition brought about by this disclosure.94 He simultaneously personifies a prestigious intellectual comportment: that of someone who having been transformed by this arrival possesses truth by virtue of their spiritual condition rather than as the exponent of a learned method or doctrine. By identifying it with the event that arrives from beyond all conditions of knowledge, in the form of an existential happening to the person that transforms the quotidian self, Derrida is placing deconstruction beyond all concern with evidence, hence beyond all argument and investigation. In so doing he situates deconstruction in the register of a revelatory occurrence to which we must testify or from which we must be excluded. Rather than forming a fallibilistic comportment capable of being restrained by attending to evidence in an objectified field, deconstruction exemplifies a subculture that turns away from all such fields in order to enact an exercise in spiritual self-transformation and to claim a uniquely privileged mode of acceding to truth.

It is possible to suggest then that through its culture of truth as a spiritually transformative event, poststructuralism assumes a charismatic and sectarian comportment, placing knowledge beyond the investigable and arguable, and reserving it for those few who have been attuned to its ‘arrival’. Given the context in which it was written—as part of a report to the denazification commission that was investigating Heidegger’s case in 1945—it would be misleading to draw too heavily on Karl Jaspers’s assessment that

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94 Compare Heidegger’s declaration that ‘in so far as Dasein is essentially its disclosedness and, as disclosed, discloses and uncovers, it is essentially “true”. Dasein is “in the truth”;’ see Heidegger, Being and Time, 263, translation modified. Original emphases.
Heidegger’s mode of thinking, which seems to me to be fundamentally unfree, dictatorial and uncommunicative, would have a very damaging effect on students at the present time. And the mode of thinking itself seems to me more important that the actual content of political judgments...\(^\text{95}\)

Nor do I wish to dwell on Jaspers’s recommendation that Heidegger be banned from public teaching while being granted a pension so that he could continue philosophising in private. For even if Derrida’s teachings lend themselves to charismatic and sectarian uses, the present circumstances of the Anglo-American humanities are so unlike the chaotic and fractured conditions that Jaspers encountered in post-war Freiburg that comparable issues do not arise.

Nonetheless, even if the charismatic and sectarian dimensions of Heideggerian philosophical hermeneutics are today restricted to its purely pedagogical and academic effects, this might still pose a threat to the cultural-political role of the humanities in maintaining an ethos of intellectual pluralism and detached inquiry. Richard Rorty attempts to capture the nature of this threat in his argument that metaphysical philosophies—that is, philosophies purporting to investigate the relation between the human mind and the cosmos or being—fail to foster the ‘light-mindedness’ about such issues required to ‘make the world’s inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality’.\(^\text{96}\) This is what led Rorty to argue for a different version of the privatisation of such forms of philosophy: not one that banned their teaching but that relegated them to a self-imposed domain of private self-cultivation, while the role of public edification would be transferred to the teaching of literature, thereby severing politics from metaphysics and theory altogether.\(^\text{97}\)

Despite Rorty’s admirable encouragement of nonchalance with regard to the big metaphysical questions, however, his prescription for the privatisation of Heideggerian philosophy and theory seems based on a misdiagnosis of their place in the modern humanities academy. On the one hand, to the extent that ‘private’ is understood in terms of the confines of the mind, it is vain to propose that poststructuralists might self-restrict their theorising to this domain. As we have seen, Heideggerian theory is not a mode of consciousness but a concrete intellectual activity that has installed itself as a subculture in several public university systems where it forms a disposition hostile to empirical knowledges.\(^\text{98}\) On the other hand, to the extent that ‘private’ means not enforced by the state, Heideggerian philosophy and poststructuralist theory have already been privatised in liberal democracies. In planning to use his office as the Nazi party’s Rektor-Führer of Freiburg University in order to compel his colleagues to suspend their empirical disciplines and open themselves to being, Heidegger thus should not be understood as politicising properly private philosophical ideas. Rather, this moment should be understood in

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98 This is what undermines Rorty’s otherwise attractive proposal to treat Derrida as a private ironist removed from all public concerns; see Richard Rorty, ‘From Ironist Theory to Private Allusions: Derrida’, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 122–37.
terms of the unforeseeable meeting of two distinct historical movements: an illiberal philosophical subculture of the ‘event’ that permitted Heidegger to mistake Hitler for its arrival, thence to accept the position of Rektor-Führer; and a murderously anti-liberal political party whose capture of the state allowed it to appoint a prestigious philosophical sage to impose its ideology in the university.99

In attempting to compose an appropriate demeanour towards the clash between poststructuralist theory and empirical intellectual history, we should firstly take due regard of the fact that each is grounded in a distinctive historical subculture or way of intellectual life, such that neither is capable of ‘disproving’ the other. We should nonetheless make use of a fallibilistic objective intellectual history in order to locate poststructuralist theorising as just one among several such intellectual subcultures in the modern humanities, thereby cultivating the detachment that allows us to treat it in a ‘light-minded’ manner: namely, as a spiritual exercise through which some of our colleagues and friends seek to bring positive disciplines into crisis in order to groom themselves for the arrival of a transformative event. Finally, we should not forget that the condition of our treating poststructuralist theory in this nonchalant manner is that at the present time the humanities exist within liberal states that refrain from enforcing a particular subculture as a political ideology, for it would not have been possible to kid with Heidegger in 1933.

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