

# From the Introduction (draft version) to The Claim of Language: A Case for the Humanities (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 2004)

## Toward Fundamental Research in the Humanities

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Early in 2001, well before the events of September 11, a young student originally from Afghanistan came to me to inquire about a major in Comparative Literature. She explained to me that her principal goal in her studies was to complete her preparation for medical school, since she and her sisters were planning to open a medical clinic in their home country. But two courses in Comparative Literature had confirmed her sense that her greatest intellectual pleasure came from literature and the arts, so she wondered whether it would be possible to pursue a dual major.

Encounters like this one remind me why I became a professor of literature and philosophy, but also help me understand how to move forward. For my pleasure in responding to Farhat Ghaznawi's inquiry derived not from any delight at hearing her estimation of the value of literary study in relation to her obligations in other fields of scientific research (that evaluation normally saddens me, for I know that it is largely a function of the impoverished character of introductory work in the sciences in North America). Rather, it came from a renewed clarity regarding my sense of why the humanities are so important. This clarity, I must emphasize, came in a kind of reflection of Farhat's vision of her future. She knew perfectly well the nature of her professional and social commitments, and was assuming them fully; her commitment was genuine and profound. Medicine was no mere duty for her, even if it was not her first love. Moreover, I sensed strongly that a related passion (if not the same one) was speaking through her interest in what she was studying in Comparative Literature. Thus, *in response*, once again, I was inspired to say: "My job will be to help you to see how your study here will make you a better doctor."

When I speak of "fundamental research in the humanities," I refer generally to inquiry that leads us to re-examine the meaning of the notions that are always in question in the humanities: fundamental notions bearing on the nature of being human: birth, death, freedom, sexuality, ethnic identity, and so forth; then, notions that are fundamental to the respective disciplines of the humanities and frequently cut across others: the nature of art and its place in society, the burden and meaning of the "fact" of history for all social existence, the constitution of the symbolic order and the institution of law, the grounds of "meaning" itself, etc.. When I told my student that study in comparative literature would help make her a better doctor, I meant that she would be encountering in her courses far-reaching questions about human mortality, about the social construction of health and the relation to disease, and about the ethical relation that lies at the grounds of community--a range of topics she would have little exposure to in her pre-med program. I also thought about the aesthetic relation itself (I mean this in a very large sense) and how this would contribute to the nature of her experience in Afghanistan. In short, I was considering that the fundamental inquiry we pursue in

Comparative Literature was vital to whatever professional future lay before her and that “vital” meant something very different from “applicable” inasmuch as such inquiry was already *presupposed* in the very foundations of medical knowledge and practice and necessary for any discovery of the meaning of that practice.. An answer like the one I gave her could have been given to a student devoted to legal study or to work in human rights, indeed to any student pursuing a true vocation. For each vocation draws in some way upon the fundamental notions to which I have referred, whether it reflects upon them or not.

Fundamental research in the humanities, as I understand it, intersects with all fields of inquiry and practice, not in the traditional manner of philosophy (may the queen rest in peace!), but in a more immanent fashion. And it does so as research that is specifically *of* the humanities; as research that proceeds from the media to which the institutions of the humanities attend, and in modes of inquiry that differ from those of the positive sciences. In this essay, I will refer to those media generally as “language,” normally intending thereby not only language in the limited sense defined by linguistics, but also the visual image, the bodily gesture (as in dance), or the media of new technologies. But whatever the form of the media, I will assume (or this will be my argument) that work that is *of* the humanities proceeds *from* the media and *at the limits* of the media that belong to the domains that hold its concern. It is from this “ground,” and in the specific modality that it helps define, that the humanities truly open to the kinds of topics I have enumerated. It follows, as I will try to show, that these topics (being human, the constitution of symbolic meaning, etc.) are therefore something more than “themes” for discussion.

My principle effort in the essay that bears the title of this volume is to defend the claim that it is possible to speak of research that is specifically *of* the humanities in the way I have just suggested. In this respect, I will be taking up the *conditions* of fundamental research in the humanities and seeking to offer a set of possible paths. I will not be claiming that the humanities can only be thought along the lines I will trace, nor that all valid work must return to its foundations and produce a thought on language.<sup>12</sup> I will merely try to show that it is possible to describe specific forms of research as properly “humanistic” (a term I will rarely use, for reasons I will discuss below), and point to the important questions that open from the basis of this understanding of the term. I have no reason to exclude other work normally associated with this designation from bearing its name. Indeed, a looser understanding of the term seems not only appropriate but entirely necessary (here I am a pragmatist). But I believe that it is crucial at this time to argue that *there are* humanities, and to demonstrate that these forms of research deserve sustained support. In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to make this claim in anything but a dogmatic or vague manner, and I would argue that this difficulty is adversely affecting the state of the humanities in the contemporary academy and beyond. There is an immense amount of creative work and reflection occurring outside the academy and the system of education. Art and literature are in no danger of expiration. But in that space where reflection on the humanities must compete for limited resources with other forms of research, a possible justification of the name of the humanities is crucial. And there can be little doubt that the fortunes of the humanities in higher education are also reflected at lower levels of the public and private systems.

So my intention is not polemical, for the most part, or exclusionary. But I do want to offer at this point one distinction. Fundamental research, as I understand it, is not “theory,” if by the latter we understand an application of some conceptual apparatus to putative objects such as the literary text, the visual image, the historical archive, or “culture” in general. In the form of research I am trying to describe, no such object can be simply assumed, and no

“metaposition” is available from which to so treat an object. A very different kind of relation, a more engaged and immanent. I try to sketch this relation throughout this book. Here let me assert simply that fundamental research must question the structure of representation itself. This is an old story, but a failure to pursue this subject rigorously has helped permit a gradual drift in the humanities toward discursive practices that deny in their very form an access to the questions that should distinguish the humanities. This drift is most troublesome in projects that claim (often superficially) theoretical inspiration, as in some forms of cultural studies. Often political or critical in intent, and governed by an instrumental understanding of theory, they end to foreclose the very possibility of thinking the political. The later task cannot be pursued, in my view, without a consequent and ongoing questioning of the structure of representation.

Fundamental research must also depart from the related tendency in much theory to devolve into a formalism of schools (theoretical camps that are concerned essentially with reproducing their own language, however much they claim to be addressing a “real”). I am under the impression that this tendency has been in the wane, as have the complaints concerning the jargon of contemporary theory. Those complaints have often been ill-intended, but they also speak to an obvious dissociation between theoretical language and the existential grounds of the questions it pretends to address. And in such complaints one can sometimes hear the quite legitimate suspicion that in theory there is no “object” at all in the sense of a compelling matter of concern or inquiry--what the Greeks expressed with their sense of “the *pragma*.” There is no escaping formalism, to be sure; it haunts every appeal to the concept. But a great deal of the most important philosophical and theoretical work of the last century attempted to think and write its way through these challenges, developing forms of discursive usage that were in no way reducible to the form of the concept. These efforts are crucial to what I want to name “fundamental research in the humanities,” and I will return to them later. Here, I will observe simply that fundamental research differs from much theory in that it is always seeking the limits of its language in responding to that to which it seeks to answer: those dimensions of experience and symbolic expression that summon it (as a kind of exigency for thought), and to which no theory will ever be quite adequate. Such research is impelled by its own *neediness* and its sense of being answerable, whereas theory proceeds with ever expanding appropriations; fundamental research proceeds from *encounter* (always from a sense that something has happened to which it must answer) and it seeks encounter. In theory, there are no encounters.<sup>3</sup>

I overstate, to be sure. There have been all kinds of events in the multifold, rapidly transforming domain of theory. But a discursive shift has occurred over the last two decades (driven in part by socio-historical and market forces I address in the opening section of my title essay) that makes the place of the humanities in theory--and theory in the humanities—*less of a question*. Of course, a good number of theorists would simply dismiss this concern. Their proper discursive domain is the trans-disciplinary domain of “theory” itself; “theory” cuts across the humanities, but is not properly contained by this area of study, and certainly not by the tenets of humanism. The point is worth considering carefully. But what has happened when theory cannot recognize the specific concerns of the humanities? Shouldn’t these concerns *claim* theory in certain ways? Can these concerns be reduced to nothing more than disciplinary constructions for a sociology of disciplinary knowledge? I do not want to minimize the difficulty of the questions here. Ultimately, my project requires a general account of the orders of discourse. But I think it is important to start from a firm hold on the claim that for the tasks of thought today, *there are* humanities. My aim in the principal essay of this volume will be to justify that claim.

In the wake of this strong statement, let me anticipate two possible objections to my undertaking. Some readers may feel that a return to philosophy of language and issues of an ontological or existential cast marks a kind of regression in view of the profound transformations in the field of literary and cultural study of the past two decades: the opening to globalization and a host of attendant socio-political issues, the opening to new media, etc.. My response to this concern is that I am seeking the means to address precisely these transformations in a way that honors what the humanities have to offer. The challenges such transformations represent are indeed part of what *calls* for the humanities, and it is the task of a fundamental research to help find forms of response. I recall here Paul Celan's words near the end of his famous Bremen Address, devoted in large measure to his effort to write in and after the murderous events of the Second World War. He suggests there that his thinking may accompany the efforts of younger poets: "Efforts of those who, with man-made stars flying overhead, unsheltered even by the traditional tent of the sky, exposed in an unsuspected, terrifying way, carry their existence into language, racked by reality and in search of it."<sup>4</sup> Fundamental research, today, begins from this sense of exposure, this groundlessness. It is a world-historical condition that has only grown more severe in the forty-six years since Celan made his statement, for the ascendancy of a technical determination of being on a global scale has grown more apparent every day. With these words, I do not mean to give a solely negative cast to the challenges facing the humanities. And I refer not to technologies per se—the new media, for example, represent an exciting challenge to thought and to the imagination—but rather to the expanding sway of technicity and the forms of technical reason that devolve from it. But I stress this issue of technicity because it suffuses every sociopolitical issue that might become a concern for the humanities. I need hardly enumerate the social and ecological afflictions that ravage the contemporary world by reason of the intimate bond between technicity and capital. Nor need I dwell, I believe, on the despair that grips many of those who seek an effective response. I would only add that this despair is fueled in important measure by a sense of the abstract character of social agency, and I would include this abstraction on the list of afflictions. It invades all dimensions of life in our societies of discipline and spectacle—all social relations and all affective experience. One way of understanding Celan's phrase ("to seek reality"), therefore, is to find ways to respond *concretely* to these forms of affliction. It is not simply to produce a "better" theory (that "enlightened" assumption has shown its limits); it is to find new ways to think agency and to give theoretical responses a genuine force. There can be no single, true way. Surely we have learned at least that lesson. But I will argue that the humanities are critical to any search for real paths, that we must learn from those who "carry their existence into language." "Racked by reality and in search of it"--that is where fundamental research in the humanities begins, whether it returns to our fraught histories, or seeks paths in an unfolding present that escapes the hold of any theoretical model.

Other readers may find my argument simply a little too philosophical for their taste. One reader with whom I shared an early draft told me he thought I was wielding an awfully large hammer for such a small nail. I suppose that I disagree as regards the size of the "nail." The failure in most contemporary theory to achieve the level of reflection I am proposing for the humanities has virtually prohibited significant access to the questions I see as crucial to any effort to rethink their nature and role, starting with the question of the human. I am not demanding that reflection in the humanities move to a new level of complexity or difficulty; I am suggesting only that it cannot ignore the ontological dimension of language and the existential questions that open there. I cannot see why humanists should find a meditation on the "essence" of language an irritating complication. And it is crucial to establish today that a

reflection on essence is not a regression for the socio-political concerns of contemporary thought (an area where the term “identity” holds sway).

I would add that I am inclined to appeal to the history of thought and a rigorous approach to its texts a bit more than is fashionable today. I do this because I believe that such an approach is the condition for any discovery of the creative dimension of philosophical practice. A respect for the history of thought is one form of resistance to the market forces at work in the field of contemporary theory. But in a more positive light, it is also a means for disclosure (as I try to demonstrate in this volume with reference to the modern history of speculative thought on language). As for careful reading, my work is predicated on the notion that one cannot begin to approach the *poietic* dimensions of the texts of philosophy, or the realities at stake in that *poiesis* (though I prefer the term “pragmatics”), without sustained attention to the *grain* of thought in its textual elaborations. And I would even add (but now I am becoming *really* unfashionable) that I understand attentive reading as a means to preserve important dimensions of the text of philosophy for the work of future scholars; I understand it as a kind of service. But “preservation” does not mean “monumentalizing”; philosophy only comes alive in the act of translating and carrying over that forms the substance of tradition. Only in this sense of tradition can philosophy become *thought*. In arguing for “fundamental research in the humanities,” and in practicing it, however modestly, I am working for the possibility of thought in the academy. An uphill battle, to be sure, but I believe that the possibility of dwelling in the “ruins” of the university, and of doing so with integrity, depends in part upon it.

1, 2. I will offer what I understand to be a *possible* account of the conditions of fundamental research in the humanities, and a discussion of the kinds of questions that open in a concrete manner from the basis of this approach. With this phrase, “possible account,” I mean to make a claim for the founded character of this argument. It seeks to respond, I will suggest, to what language gives of relation. The fact that this offering of relation will be engaged in always singular manners (and only comes about as it is engaged and drawn forth—in an answer that effectively discovers its conditions) prompts me to use the word “possible” and to insist that I am not proposing a foundation. But my account differs from a pragmatic one in that I claim to be engaging the *pragma* of thought. When I write that *there are* humanities, I mean this in a strong sense. One could appropriately call my argument “essentialist,” but it rests upon a rethinking of the notion of essence that is inspired by the work of Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, and Maurice Blanchot.

A defense of the humanities for a broad public would focus most appropriately, I believe, on some of the notions I have enumerated as proper to “fundamental research.” A broader public should be introduced to what I tried to say about the role of the humanities for any vocation, for example. But the possibility of this research always requires justification, and it is at this level that I pitch my work in this volume.

3. I cite here a phrase from an essay I contributed to the inaugural issue of *Traces* (2001, 231-232)..

4. Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Riverdale-on-Hudson: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1986), 35.