Philology is just about the least with-it, least sexy, and most unmodern of any of the branches of learning associated with humanism, and it is the least likely to turn up in discussions about humanism’s relevance to life at the beginning of the twenty-first century. But that rather discouraging thought shall have to sit for a while, as I try to move into my subject with my head held high and, I hope, your endurance strong. I suppose that it would help lower resistance to the otherwise perhaps unattractive idea of philology as a mustily antiquarian discipline to begin by mentioning that perhaps the most radical and intellectually audacious of all Western thinkers during the past 150 years, Nietzsche, was and always considered himself first and foremost a philologist. That should immediately dispel any vestigial notion of philology as a form of reactionary learning, the kind embodied in the character of Dr. Casaubon in George Eliot’s Middlemarch—sterile, ineffectual, and hopelessly irrelevant to life.


THE RETURN TO PHILOLOGY

References
Philology is, literally, the love of words, but as a discipline it acquires a quasi-scientific intellectual and spiritual prestige at various periods in all of the major cultural traditions, including the Western and the Arabic-Islamic traditions that have framed my own development. Suffice it to recall briefly that in the Islamic tradition, knowledge is premised upon a philological attention to language beginning with the Koran, the uncreated word of God (and indeed the word "Koran" itself means reading), and continuing through the emergence of scientific grammar in Khalil ibn Ahmad and Sibawayh to the rise of jurisprudence (fiqh) and ijihad and ta‘wil, jurisprudential hermeneutics and interpretation, respectively. Later, the study of fiqh al lugha, or the hermeneutics of language, emerges in Arab-Islamic culture as possessing considerable importance as a practice for Islamic learning. All these involve a detailed scientific attention paid to language as bearing within it knowledge of a kind entirely limited to what language does and does not do. There was (as I mentioned in my last chapter) a consolidation of the interpretive sciences that underlie the system of humanistic education, which was itself established by the twelfth century in the Arab universities of southern Europe and North Africa, well before its counterpart in the Christian West. Similar developments occur in the closely related Judaic tradition in Andalusia, North Africa, the Levant, and Mesopotamia. In Europe, Giambattista Vico’s *New Science* (1744) launches an interpretive revolution based upon a kind of philological heroism whose results are to reveal, as Nietzsche was to put it a century and a half later, that the truth concerning human history is "a mobile army of metaphors and metonyms" whose meaning is to be unceasingly decoded by acts of reading and interpretation grounded in the shapes of words as bearers of reality, a reality hidden, misleading, resistant, and difficult. The science of reading, in other words, is paramount for humanistic knowledge.

Emerson said of language that it is "fossil poetry," or, as Richard Poirier explicates the notion, "that there are discoverable traces in language of that aboriginal power by which we invent ourselves as a unique form of nature" (135). Poirier continues:

When Emerson says in [his essay] "Prudence" that "we write from aspiration and antagonism, as well as from experience," he means that while we aspire to say something new, the materials at hand indicate that whatever we say can be understood only if it is relatively familiar. We therefore become antagonistic to conventions of language even though we are in need of them [and need to understand how they operate, for which only an attentive philological reading can serve]. Indeed, the social and literary forms that ask for our compliance were themselves produced in resistance to conventions of an earlier time. Even in words that now seem tired or dead we can discover a desire for transformation that once infused them. Any word, in the variety and even contradictoriness of its meanings, gives evidence of earlier antagonistic uses, and it is this which encourages us to turn on them again, to change or trope them still further. (138)

A true philological reading is active; it involves getting inside the process of language already going on in words and making it disclose what may be hidden or incomplete or masked or distorted in any text we may have before us. In this view of language, then, words are not passive markers or signifiers standing in unassumingly for a higher reality; they are, instead, an integral formative part of the reality itself. And, Poirier says in an earlier essay,

literature makes the strongest possible claims on my attention because more than any other form of art or expression it demonstrates what can be made, what can be done with something shared by everyone, used by everyone in the daily conduct of life, and something, besides, which carries most subtly
and yet measurably within itself, its vocabulary and syntax, the governing assumptions of a society's social, political, and economic arrangements. But unlike works of music, dance, paintings, or films literature depends for its principle or essential resource on materials that it must share in an utterly gregarious way with the society at large and with its history. None can teach us so much about what words do to us and how, in turn, we might try to do something to them which will perhaps modify the order of things on which they depend for their meaning. To Literature is left the distinction that it invites the reader to a dialectical relationship to words with an intensity allowable nowhere else. (133-34)

It will be clear from all this that reading is the indispensable act, the initial gesture without which any philology is simply impossible. Poirier notes simply but elegantly that literature is words put to more complex and subtle uses, both by convention and originality, than in any other place in society. I think he is absolutely right, and so in what follows I shall preserve this notion of his, that literature provides the most heightened example we have of words in action and therefore is the most complex and rewarding—for all sorts of reasons—of verbal practices. In reflecting about this recently, I came across the astounding objection current here and there amongst professors of literature in the United States that just as there is sexism and elitism and ageism and racism, there is also something reprehensible called "readism," reading considered so seriously and naively as to constitute a radical flaw. Therefore, runs this argument, one shouldn't be taken in by reading, since to read too carefully is to be misled by structures of power and authority. I find this logic (if it is logic) quite bizarre, and if it is supposed to lead us out of slavish attitudes toward authority in a liberating way then I have to say it is, alas, yet another silly chimera. Only acts of reading done more and more carefully, as Poirier suggests, more and more attentively, more and more widely, more and more receptively and resistantly (if I may coin a word) can provide humanism with an adequate exercise of its essential worth, especially given the changed bases for humanism that I spoke about in my last lecture.

For a reader of texts to move immediately, however, from a quick, superficial reading into general or even concrete statements about vast structures of power or into vaguely therapeutic structures of salutary redemption (for those who believe that literature makes you a better person) is to abandon the abiding basis for all humanistic practice. That basis is at bottom what I have been calling philological, that is, a detailed, patient scrutiny of and a lifelong attentiveness to the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings who exist in history: hence the word "secular," as I use it, as well as the word "worldliness." Both of these notions allow us to take account not of eternally stable or supernaturally informed values, but rather of the changing bases for humanistic praxis regarding values and human life that are now fully upon us in the new century. Again drawing on Emerson and Poirier, I should like to argue that reading involves the contemporary humanist in two very crucial motions that I shall call reception and resistance. Reception is submitting oneself knowledgeably to texts and treating them provisionally at first as discrete objects (since this is how they are initially encountered); moving then, by dint of expanding and elucidating the often obscure or invisible frameworks in which they exist, to their historical situations and the way in which certain structures of attitude, feeling, and rhetoric get entangled with some currents, some historical and social formulations of their context.

Only by receiving the text in all its complexity and with the critical awareness of change that I described in my last lecture can one move from the specific to the general both
integratively and synthetically. Thus a close reading of a literary text—a novel, poem, essay, or drama, say—in effect will gradually locate the text in its time as part of a whole network of relationships whose outlines and influence play an informing role in the text. And I think it is important to say that for the humanist, the act of reading is the act therefore of first putting oneself in the position of the author, for whom writing is a series of decisions and choices expressed in words. It need hardly be said that no author is completely sovereign or above the time, place, and circumstances of his or her life, so that these, too, must be understood if one is to put oneself in the author's position sympathetically. Thus to read an author like Conrad, for example, is first of all to read his work as if with the eye of Conrad himself, which is to try to understand each word, each metaphor, each sentence as something consciously chosen by Conrad in preference to any number of other possibilities. We know of course from looking at the manuscripts of his works how laborious and how time-consuming that process of composition and choice was for him: it therefore behooves us as his readers to make a comparable effort by getting inside his language so to speak, inside it so as to understand why he put it that way in particular, to understand it as it was made.

Let me interrupt my argument here to go to the question of aesthetics, since as someone whose intellectual life has been dedicated largely to the understanding and teaching of great works of literary and musical art, as well as to a career of social and political engagement and commitment—the two separately from each other—I have found that the quality of what one reads is often as important as how and why one reads in the first place. While I know there can be no prior agreement among all readers as to what constitutes a work of art, there is no doubt that part of the humanistic enterprise that I have been discussing in these lectures departs from the notion that every individual, whether by convention, personal circumstances and effort, or education, is able to recognize aesthetic quality and distinction that can be felt, if not wholly understood, in the course of reading or experiencing. This is true in every tradition that I know of—the institutions of literature, for example, exist in all of them—and I see no point now in trying to prove this by lengthy argument. I think it is also true that the aesthetic as a category is, at a very profound level, to be distinguished from the quotidian experiences of existence that we all have. To read Tolstoy, Mahfouz, or Melville, to listen to Bach, Duke Ellington, or Elliott Carter, is to do something different from reading the newspaper or listening to the taped music you get while the phone company or your doctor puts you on hold. This is not to say, however, that journalism or policy papers are to be read quickly and superficially: I advocate attentive reading in all cases, as I shall be showing later. But in the main, I would agree with Adorno that there is a fundamental irreconciliability between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic that we must sustain as a necessary condition of our work as humanists. Art is not simply there: it exists intensely in a state of unreconciled opposition to the deprivations of daily life, the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor. One can call this heightened status for art the result of performance, of protracted elaboration (as in the structures of a great novel or poem), of ingenious execution and insight: I myself cannot do without the category of the aesthetic as, in the final analysis, providing resistance not only to my own efforts to understand and clarify and elucidate as reader, but also as escaping the leveling pressures of everyday experience from which, however, art paradoxically derives.

Yet this aesthetic fact by no means entails the ultimate otherworldliness that, some theorists and artists have maintained, allows the work of art to escape meaningful discussion and historical reflection altogether. Nor, much as I am tempted by
her argument, can I go as far as Elaine Scarry in making an
equivalence between loving the beauty of art and being just.
On the contrary, as I argued in *Culture and Imperialism*, the
interesting thing about a great work is that it generates more,
rather than less complexity and becomes over time what
Raymond Williams has called a whole web of often contra-
dictory cultural notations. Even the skillfully wrought novels
of Jane Austen, for instance, are affiliated with the circum-
stances of her time; this is why she makes elaborate reference
to such sordid practices as slavery and fights over property. Yet,
to repeat, her novels can never be reduced only to social,
political, historical, and economic forces but rather, are, anti-
thetically, in an unresolved dialectical relationship with them,
in a position that obviously depends on history but is not reducible to it. For we must, I think, assume that there is
always the supervening reality of the aesthetic work without
which the kind of humanism I am talking about here really
has no essential meaning, only an instrumental one.

Call this a particular kind of faith, or as I prefer, an enabling
conviction in the enterprise of making human history: for me
it is the ground of humanistic practice and, as I said a moment
ago, the presence of the aesthetic demands the exceptional kind
of close reading and reception whose best formulation was
given, I believe, by Leo Spitzer in the form of a philological
description of very powerful immediacy. This process of recep-
tion involves what he calls fighting one's way to the unity of an
author, the spiritual etymon, by repeated readings. Spitzer
explains that the scholar-humanist-reader must be asked
to work from the surface to the “inward life-center” of the
work of art: first observing details about the superficial appear-
ance of the particular work (and the “ideas” expressed by a poet
are, also, only one of the superficial traits in a work of art); then,
grouping these details and seeking to integrate them into a cre-
ative principle which may have been present in the soul of the
artist; and, finally, making the return trip to all the other groups
of observations in order to find whether the “inward form”
one has tentatively constructed gives an account of the whole.
The scholar will surely be able to state, after three or four of
these “voyages,” whether he has found the life-giving cen-
ter, the sun of the solar system [which is, according to Spitzer,
the work’s compositional principle]. (19)

This actually occurs, he says a bit later, when, in the act of
reading, one is “struck by a detail, followed by a conviction
that this detail is connected basically with the work of art”
(27). There is no guarantee that the making of this connec-
tion is correct, no scientific proof that it has worked. There
is only the inner faith of the humanist “in the power bestowed
on the human mind of investigating the human mind,” as well
as an abiding sense that what one finds in the work is genu-
inely worth investigating. For this, of course, there is no
guarantee, only a deep subjective sense for which no substi-
tute, no guidebook or authoritative source is possible. One
must make the decision oneself and take responsibility for it.
Let me continue quoting more from Spitzer:

How often, with all the theoretical experience of method
accumulated in me over the years, have I stared blankly, quite
similar to one of my beginning students, at a page that would
not yield its magic. The only way leading out of this state of
unproductivity is to read and re-read, patiently and confidently,
in an endeavor to become, as it were[,] soaked through and
through with the atmosphere of the work. And suddenly one
word, one line, [or one set of words and lines], stands out, and
we realize that, now, a relationship has been established
between the poem and us. From this point, I have usually found
that, what with other observations adding themselves to the
first, and with previous experiences of the circles intervening,
and with associations given by previous education building up
before me . . . [as well as, I would add, those prior commitments
and habits that in effect make us citizens of the society we live in, insiders and outsiders both] it does not seem long until the characteristic "click" occurs, which is the indication that detail and whole have found a common denominator—which gives the etymology of the writing. And looking back on this process ... we see indeed, that to have read is to have read, to understand is equivalent to having understood. (47)

What is tautological about this fascinating description of close reading is precisely what needs emphasis, I think. For the process of reading begins and ends in the reader, and what enables the reading is an irreducibly personal act of commitment to reading and interpreting, the gesture of reception that includes opening oneself to the text and, just as importantly, being willing to make informed statements about its meaning and what that meaning might attach itself to. Only connect, says E. M. Forster, a marvelous injunction to the chain of statements and meanings that proliferate out of close reading. This is what R. P. Blackmur calls bringing literature to performance. And Emerson saying, "Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself,—must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know."

It is the avoidance of this process of taking final comradely responsibility for one's reading that explains, I think, a crippling limitation in those varieties of deconstructive Derridean readings that end (as they began) in undecidability and uncertainty. To reveal the wavering and vacillation in all writing is useful up to a point, just as it may here and there be useful to show, with Foucault, that knowledge in the end serves power. But both alternatives defer for too long a declaration that the actuality of reading is, fundamentally, an act of perhaps modest human emancipation and enlightenment that changes and enhances one's knowledge for purposes other than reductiveness, cynicism, or fruitless standing aside. Of course when we read, for example, a poem by John Ashberry or a novel by Flaubert, attention to the text is far more intense and focused that would be the case with a newspaper or magazine article about foreign or military policy. But in both instances attention in reading requires alertness and making connections that are otherwise hidden or obscured by the text, which, in the case of an article having to do with political decisions about whether to go to war, for instance, demands that as citizens we enter into the text with responsibility and scrupulous care. Otherwise, why bother at all? As for what, in the end, are the enlightening and, yes, emancipatory purposes of close reading, I shall get to them soon enough.

No one is required to imitate the inimitable Spitzer or, for that matter, that other admirable philologist who had such a profound influence on our reading of the Western classics in this country, Erich Auerbach (about whose great work Mimesis I shall speak in the next chapter of this book). But it is necessary to realize that close reading has to originate in critical receptivity as well as in a conviction that even though great aesthetic work ultimately resists total understanding, there is a possibility of a critical understanding that may never be completed but can certainly be provisionally affirmed. It is a truism that all readings are of course subject to later rereadings, but it is also good to remember that there can be heroic first readings that enable many others after them. Who can forget the rush of enrichment on reading Tolstoy or hearing Wagner or Armstrong, and how can one ever forget the sense of change in oneself as a result? It takes a kind of heroism to undertake great artistic efforts, to experience the shattering disorientation of "making" an Anna Karenina, the Missae Luba, the Taj Mahal. This is proper, I think, to the humanistic enterprise, the sense of authorial heroism as something to emulate, admire, aspire to for readers, as well as for poets, novelists, dramatists. It is not only anxiety that drives Melville, for instance, to match Shakespeare and Milton, or anxiety that
spurs Robert Lowell to go on from Eliot, or anxiety that drives Stevens to outdo the audacity of the French symbolists, or anxiety in a critic such as the late Ian Watt to go beyond Leavis and Richards. There is competitiveness of course, but also admiration and enthusiasm for the job to be done that won't be satisfied until one's own road is taken after a great predecessor has first carved out a path. Much the same can and must be said about humanistic heroism of allowing oneself to experience the work with something of its primary drive and informing power. We are not scribblers or humble scribes but minds whose actions become a part of the collective human history being made all around us.

Ideally, what keeps the humanist honest is this sense of a common enterprise shared with others, an undertaking with its own built-in constraints and disciplines. I've always found an excellent paradigm for this in the Islamic tradition, so little known amongst Eurocentric scholars all too busy extolling some supposedly exclusive humanistic Western ideal. Since in Islam the Koran is the Word of God, it is therefore impossible ever fully to grasp, though it must repeatedly be read. But the fact that it is in language already makes it incumbent on readers first of all to try to understand its literal meaning, with a profound awareness that others before them have attempted the same daunting task. So the presence of others is given as a community of witnesses whose availability to the contemporary reader is retained in the form of a chain, each witness depending to some degree on an earlier one. This system of interdependent readings is called "isnad." The common goal is to try to approach the ground of the text, its principle or usul, although there must always be a component of personal commitment and extraordinary effort, called "ijtihad" in Arabic. (Without a knowledge of Arabic, it is difficult to know that "ijtihad" derives from the same root as the now notorious word jihad, which does not mainly mean holy war but rather a primarily spiritual exertion on behalf of the truth.) It is not surprising that since the fourteenth century there has been a robust struggle going on about whether "ijtihad" is permissible, to what degree, and within what limits. The dogmatic view of orthodox Islamic readings argues that Ibn-Taymiyya (1263-1328 c.e.) was right and that only as-salaf al-salih (pious forerunners) should be followed, thus closing the door, as it were, on individual interpretation. But that has always been challenged, especially since the eighteenth century, and the proponents of "ijtihad" have by no means been routed.

As with other interpretive religious traditions, a great deal of controversy has accrued to all these terms and their admissible meanings, and perhaps I dangerously simplify or overlook many of the arguments. But I am right in saying that at the limits of what is permissible in any personal effort to understand a text's rhetorical and semantic structure are the requirements of jurisprudence, narrowly speaking, plus the conventions and mentalities, speaking more broadly, of an age. Law, qanun, is what, in the public realm, governs or has hegemony over acts of personal initiative even when freedom of expression is decently available. Responsibly, one cannot just say anything one pleases and in whichever way one may wish to say it. This sense of responsibility and acceptability not only reins in quite impressively what Spitzer has to say about philological induction, but also sets the limits for what Emerson and Poirier offer: all three examples I have given, from the Arab, philological-hermeneutic, and pragmatic American traditions, use different terms to characterize something like conventions, semantic frameworks, and social or even political communities operating as partial constraints on what would otherwise be an out-of-control subjective frenzy, which is what Swift parodies mercilessly in A Tale of a Tub.

Between the abiding enactment of a rigorous commit-
ment to reading for meaning—and not simply for discursive structures and textual practices, which is not to say those are not important—and the requirements of formulating that meaning as it contributes actively to enlightenment and emancipation, there is a considerable space for the exercise of humanistic energy. A recent study by David Harlan correctly laments in its contents and title—*The Degradation of American History*—the slow dissipation of gravity and commitment in the writing of American history and theory. I do not agree with his somewhat sentimental exceptionalist conclusions about what America should be learning from its own history, but his diagnosis of the currently depressed state of academic writing is an accurate one. He contends that the influence of antifoundationalism, discourse analysis, automatized and tokenized relativism, and professionalism, among other orthodoxies, has denatured and defanged the historian’s mission. Much the same applies, I believe, in humanistic literary practice, where a new dogmatism has separated some literary professionals not only from the public sphere but from other professionals who don’t use the same jargon. The alternatives seem now to be quite impoverishing: either become a technocratic deconstructionist, discourse analyst, new historicist, and so on, or retreat into a nostalgic celebration of some past state of glory associated with what is sentimentally evoked as humanism. What is missing altogether is some intellectual, as opposed to a merely technical, component to humanistic practice that might restore it to a place of relevance in our time. This is what I am trying to do here, that is, to escape the impoverishing dichotomy.

Enter at last the notion of resistance. I see no way at all of introducing resistance without the prior discussion of reception in the various ways I have just described, however inadequately and telegraphically: that process of reading and philological reception is the irreducible core. To recapitulate briefly: Reception is based on *ijtihad*, close reading, hermeneutic induction, and it entails troping the general language further in one’s own critical language with a full recognition that the work of art in question remains at a necessary final remove, unreconciled and in a state of integral wholeness that one has tried to comprehend or impose. But the process does not stop there by any means. For if, as I believe, there is now taking place in our society an assault on thought itself, to say nothing of democracy, equality, and the environment, by the dehumanizing forces of globalization, neoliberal values, economic greed (euphemistically called the free market), as well as imperialist ambition, the humanist must offer alternatives now silenced or unavailable through the channels of communication controlled by a tiny number of news organizations.

We are bombarded by prepackaged and reified representations of the world that usurp consciousness and preempt democratic critique, and it is to the overturning and dismantling of these alienating objects that, as C. Wright Mills put it so correctly, the intellectual humanist’s work ought to be devoted. It is still very fortunately the case, however, that the American university remains the one public space available to real alternative intellectual practices: no other institution like it on such a scale exists anywhere else in the world today, and I for one am immensely proud to have been a part of it for the longest and better part of my life. University humanists are in an exceptionally privileged position in which to do their work, but it is not simply as academic professionals or experts that their advantage lies. Rather, the academy—with its devotion to reflection, research, Socratic teaching, and some measure of skeptical detachment—allows one freedom from the deadlines, the obligations to an importunate and exigent employer, and the pressures to produce on a regular basis, that afflict so many experts in our policy-think-tank
riddled age. Not the least valuable thing about the reflection
and thought that takes place in a university is that one has
time to do it.

One issue that comes up directly is the matter of what lan-
guage to use in the work of resistance, what idiom, what
manner of addressing one’s students, colleagues, fellow citi-
zens. There has been considerable debate in the academic and
popular media about so-called good and bad writing. My
own pragmatic answer to the problem is simply to avoid jarg-
on that only alienates a potentially wide constituency. True,
as Judith Butler has argued, the prepackaged style of what is
considered acceptable prose risks concealing the ideological
presuppositions it is based on; she has cited Adorno’s difficult
syntax and thorny mode of expression as a precedent for
eluding, even defeating the smooth papering-over of injustice
and suffering by which discourse covers its complicity with
political malfeasance. Unfortunately, Adorno’s poetic insights
and dialectical genius are in very short supply even among
those who try to emulate his style; as Sartre said in another
context, Valéry was a petit bourgeois, but not every petit
bourgeois is a Valéry. Not every corner of rebarbative language
is an Adorno.

The risks of specialized jargons for the humanities, inside
and outside the university, are obvious: they simply substitute
one prepackaged idiom for another. Why not assume instead
that the role of the humanistic exposition is to make the
demystifications and questionings that are so central to our
enterprise as transparent and as efficient as possible? Why turn
“bad writing” into an issue at all, except as a way of falling
into the trap of focusing uselessly on how something is said
rather than the more important issue of what is said? There
are too many available models of intelligible language all
around us whose basic graspability and efficiency goes the
whole range from difficult to comparatively simple, between
the language of, say, Henry James and that of W.E.B. DuBois.
There is no need to employ preposterously outré and repel-
ent idioms as a way of showing independence and original-
ity. Humanism should be a form of disclosure, not of secrecy
or religious illumination. Expertise as a distancing device has
gotten out of control, especially in some academic forms of
expression, to the extent that they have become antidemoc-
Ratic and even anti-intellectual. At the heart of what I have
been calling the movement of resistance in humanism—the
first part of this being reception and reading—is critique, and
critique is always restlessly self-clarifying in search of free-
dom, enlightenment, more agency, and certainly not their
opposites.

None of this can be done easily. In the first place, the
prepackaged information that dominates our patterns of
thought (the media, advertising, official declarations, and ide-
ological political argument designed to persuade or to lull
into submission, not to stimulate thought and engage the
intellect) tends to fit into short, telegraphic forms. CNN and
the New York Times present information in headlines or sound
bites, which are often followed by slightly longer periods of
information whose stated purpose is to tell us what is hap-
pening “in reality.” All the choices, exclusions, and
emphases—to say nothing of the history of the subject at
hand—are invisible, dismissed as irrelevant. What I have been
calling humanistic resistance therefore needs to occur in
longer forms, longer essays, longer periods of reflection, so
that the early history of Saddam Hussein’s government
(always referred to deliberately as his “regime”), for example,
can emerge in all its sordid detail, detail which includes an
extensive pattern of direct U.S. support for him. Somebody
needs to be able to present that as a way of guiding us as we
go triumphantly from war to “reconstruction,” with most
Americans in the dark about Iraq itself, its history, its institu-
tions, as well as our extensive dealings with it over the
decades. None of this can be done in the form of short bursts
of information concerning the “axis of evil” or stating that
“Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction and is a direct
threat to the United States and our way of life,” phrases that
need laborious dismantling, unpacking, documentation, and
refutation or confirmation. These are matters of the gravest
importance for American humanists, who are citizens of the
world’s only superpower and whose acquiescence (or silence)
are required for decisions of the greatest importance to us as
informed citizens. Therefore humanistic reflection must liter-
ally break the hold on us of the short, headline, sound-bite
format and try to induce instead a longer, more deliberate
process of reflection, research, and inquiring argument that
really looks at the case(s) in point.

A great deal more might be said about the question of lan-
guage, but I want to press on to other concerns. There is no
doubt, first of all, that whatever reading one does is situated
in a particular time and place, just as the writing one encoun-
ters in the course of humanistic study is located in a series
of frameworks derived from tradition, the transmission and vari-
ation of texts, and accumulated readings and interpretations.
And just as important are the social contexts that, generally, I
shall describe as those between the aesthetic and historical
domains. At the risk of simplifying, it can be said that two sit-
uations are in play: that of the humanistic reader in the pres-
ent and that of the text in its framework. Each requires care-
ful analysis; each inhabits both a local and a wider historical
framework, and each must solicit relentless questioning by the
humanist. The literary text derives, true enough, from the
assumed privacy and solitude of the individual writer, but the
tension between that privileged location and the social loca-
tion of the writer is ever present, whether the writer is a his-
torian like Henry Adams, a relatively isolated poet like Emily

Dickinson, or a renowned man of letters like Henry James.

There is no way at all of focusing on either the original pri-
vacy or the public place of the writer without examining
how each of them comes to us, whether by curricular canon,
intellectual or critical frameworks provided by a presiding
authority (such as that exercised by Perry Miller at one time),
or a massive range of debate as to whose tradition this is, for
what purpose, and so on. Immediately then, the constitution
of tradition and the usable past comes up, and that in turn
leads us inevitably to identity and the national state. A num-
ber of useful analyses both here and in England by Stuart Hall
and Raymond Williams have discussed this matter: the
enveloping national story with its carefully devised begin-
ings, middles, ends, its periods, moments of glory, defeat, tri-
umph, and so on.

What I am trying to describe then is the created national
horizon, in which humanistic study, with all its inner move-
ments, disputed readings, contentious as well as cerebral rati-
ocinations, occurs. Now I want to caution against going from
the private jihad or close reading, to the wide horizon too
quickly, too abruptly and unreflectively. But there can be no
doubt that for me humanism as a worldly practice can move
beyond and inhabit more than just the original privacy of the
writer or the relatively private space of the classroom or inner
sanctum, both of which are inevitably necessary to what we
want to do as humanists. Education involves widening circles
of awareness, each of which is distinct analytically while being
connected to the others by virtue of worldly reality. A reader
is in a place, in a school or university, in a work place, or in a
specific country at a particular time, situation, and so forth.
But these are not passive frameworks. In the process of wid-
ening the humanistic horizon, its achievements of insight and
understanding, the framework must be actively understood,
constructed, and interpreted. And this is what resistance is: the
ability to differentiate between what is directly given and what may be withheld, whether because one's own circumstances as a humanistic specialist may confine one to a limited space beyond which one can't venture or because one is indoctrinated to recognize only what one has been educated to see or because only policy experts are presumed to be entitled to speak about the economy, health services, or foreign and military policies, issues of urgent concern to the humanist as a citizen. Does one accept the prevailing horizons and confinements, or does one try as a humanist to challenge them?

This, I believe, is where the relevance of humanism to contemporary America and the world of which it is a part has to be addressed and understood if it is to make any sense beyond teaching our students and fellow citizens how to read well. This is an estimable task in itself, of course, but one that by its own inventive energies also necessarily takes one further and further from even the most highly cherished inward reception. Yes, we need to keep coming back to the words and structures in the books we read, but, just as these words were themselves taken by the poet from the world and evoked from out of silence in the forceful ways without which no creation is possible, readers must also extend their readings out into the various worlds each of us resides in. It is especially appropriate for the contemporary humanist to cultivate that sense of multiple worlds and complex interacting traditions, that inevitable combination I've mentioned of belonging and detachment, reception and resistance. The task of the humanist is not just to occupy a position or place, nor simply to belong somewhere, but rather to be both insider and outsider to the circulating ideas and values that are at issue in our society or someone else's society or the society of the other. In this connection, it is invigorating to recall (as I have in other places) Isaac Deutscher's insufficiently known book of essays, The Non-Jewish Jew, for an account of how great Jewish thinkers—Spinoza, chief among them, as well as Freud, Heine, and Deutscher himself—were in, and at the same time renounced, their tradition, preserving the original tie by submitting it to the corrosive questioning that took them well beyond it, sometimes banishing them from community in the process. Not many of us can or would want to aspire to such a dialectically fraught, so sensitively located a class of individuals, but it is illuminating to see in such a destiny the crystallized role of the American humanist, the nonhumanist humanist as it were.

In other words, if I were forced to choose for myself as humanist the role either of patriotically "affirming" our country as Richard Rorty has recently enunciated it (his word is "achieving," not affirming, but it amounts in the end to the same thing) or nonpatriotically questioning it, I would undoubtedly choose the role of questioner. Humanism, as Blackmur said of modernism in another connection, is a technique of trouble, and it must stay that way now at a time when the national and international horizon is undergoing massive transformations and reconfigurations. The task is constitutively an unending one, and it should not aspire to conclusion of the sort that has the corollary and, in my estimate deleterious, effect of securing one an identity to be fought over, defended, and argued, while a great deal about our world that is interesting and worth venturing into simply gets left aside. In the post-Cold War world, the politics of identity and partition (I speak only of aggressive identity politics, not the defense of identity when threatened by extinction, as in the Palestinian case) have brought more trouble and suffering than they are worth, nowhere more than when they are associated with precisely those things, such as the humanities, traditions, art, and values, that identity allegedly defends and safeguards, constituting in the process territories and selves that seem to require killing rather than living.
been altogether too much of this in the United States since 9/11, with the result that meditative and nonadogmatic examination of "our" role and traditions always seems to end up reinforcing the war against the whole world that the United States seems to be conducting.

What then can be more fitting for the humanist in the United States than to accept responsibility for meditating rather than resolving the tension between the aesthetic and the national, using the former to challenge, reexamine and resist the latter in those slow but rational modes of reception and understanding which is the humanist's way. As for making those connections that allow us to see part and whole, that is the main thing: what to connect with, how, and how not?

It is necessary to discuss the agonistic moral universe embodied in a drama or novel and see in that aesthetic experience a searing incarnation of conflict and choice. But it is, I think, an abrogation of that reading to blind oneself to the similar drama in the battle all around us for justice, emancipation, and the diminishment of human suffering. Economics, for example, is misapprehended as the province only of the financial celebrities, CEOs and experts who gather annually at Davos (even there, however, one suspects that some turbulence is occurring), while the absolutely fundamental work of economists like Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen on entitlement, distribution, poverty, famines, equity, and freedom has furnished a massive challenge to the market economics that rule nearly everywhere. I mention these two Nobel laureates as an instructive example of what, on all sides of the humanities, is occurring intellectually by way of movement, reconfiguration of, and resistance to the overmastering paradigm of globalization and the false dichotomies offered, for instance, in the vulgarizing placations of Thomas Friedman in The Lexus and the Olive Tree or Benjamin Barber's Jihad Versus McWorld. What took place in November 1999 in Seattle or as a result of the health-care system insurrections that disrupt hospitals when the corporate inequities of HMOs become too much even for physicians, to say nothing of those millions of uninsured patients who have no care at all—these are matters that are part of the humanistic horizon that our often quietistic disciplines have taught us not to meddle with, but which need examination and resistance in some of the deliberate ways I have been suggesting, albeit briefly and only suggestively. And of course since 9/11 we need even more care and skepticism in the bellicose "defense" of our values than that which disaffected and perhaps even intimidated former dissenting intellectuals have been urging on the country at large.

America's place in the world of nations and cultures, when, as the last superpower, our foreign policy—based on the projection and deployment of vast military, political, and economic resources—has amounted to a new variety of mostly unchallenged interventionism, has been a very significant aspect of America for humanists. To be a humanist here and now in the United States is not the same thing as being one in Brazil, India, or South Africa, and not even like being one in a major European country. Who is "us" when the nightly news commentator asks politely of the secretary of state whether "our" sanctions against Saddam Hussein are worth it, when literally millions of innocent civilians, not members of that dreadful "regime," are being killed, maimed, starved, and bombed so that we can make our power felt? Or when a news reader asks the current secretary whether, in our rage to prosecute Iraq for weapons of mass destruction (which have not turned up anyway), "we" are going to apply the same standard and ask Israel about its weapons, and receives no answer at all.

The deployment of such pronouns as "we" and "us" are also the stuff of lyrics and odes and dirges and tragedies, and
so it becomes necessary from the training we have had to raise the questions of responsibility and values, of pride and extraordinary arrogance, of an amazing moral blindness. Who is the “we” who bombs civilians or who shrugs off the looting and pillaging of Iraq’s astonishing heritage with phrases like “stuff happens” or “freedom is untidy”? One ought to be able to say somewhere and at some length, I am not this “we” and what “you” do, you do not in my name.

Humanism is about reading; it is about perspective, and, in our work as humanists, it is about transitions from one realm, one area of human experience to another. It is also about the practice of identities other than those given by the flag or the national war of the moment. That deployment of an alternative identity is what we do when we read and when we connect parts of the text to others parts and when we go on to expand the area of attention to include widening circles of pertinence. Everything I have said about the humanities and humanism is based upon a stubborn conviction that must, that can only begin in the individual particular, without which there can be no real literature, no utterance worth making and cherishing, no human history and agency fit to protect and encourage. But one can be a nominalist and a realist and also remark on the leap to mobilized collective selves—without careful transition or deliberate reflection or with only unmediated assertion—that prove to be more destructive than anything they are supposedly defending. Those transitionless leaps are the ones to be looked at very hard and very severely. They lead to what Lukacs used to call totalities, unknowable existentially but powerfully mobilizing. They possess great force exactly because they are corporate and can stand in unjustifiably for action that is supposed to be careful, measured, and humane. “Our view,” said Mrs. Albright, “is that these sanctions are worth it,” “it” being the killing and destruction of numberless civilians genocidally dispatched by a phrase. The only word to break up the leap to such corporate banditry is the word “humane,” and humanists without an exfoliating, elaborating, demystifying general humaneness are, as the phrase has it, sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. Naturally this gets us to the question of citizenship as well, but that is as it should be.

When humanists are enjoined or scolded to get back to their texts and leave the world to those whose job is to run it, it is salutary, indeed urgent, to be reminded that our age and our country symbolize not just what has been settled and permanently resides here, but always and constantly the undocumented turbulence of unsettled and unhoused exiles, immigrants, itinerant or captive populations for whom no document, no adequate expression yet exists sufficient to take account of what they go through. And in its profoundly unsettled energy, this country deserves the kind of widening awareness beyond academic specialization that a whole range of younger humanists have signaled as cosmopolitan, worldly, mobile.

Ironic, in this period of extremes, that even though this is the greatest age of documentary expansion and rapid, if flattening and one-dimensional, communication in history, it is also the one in which, I believe, more experience is being lost by marginalization and incorporation and homogenizing word processing than ever before, the experience of the undocumented peoples that are described so cavalierly now by our roving imperial reporters as residing at the ends of the earth. Humanism, I strongly believe, must excavate the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant, barely surviving groups, the places of exclusion and invisibility, the kind of testimony that doesn’t make it onto the reports but which more and more is about whether an overexploited environment, sustainable small economies and small nations, and marginalized peoples outside as well as inside the maw of the metropolitan center can sur-
vive the grinding down and flattening out and displacement that are such prominent features of globalization.

I should like to conclude with a thought that has been the paramount feature of my always changing and, I'd like to think, receptive and resistant practice as a humanist in the United States: for that is the way I conceive of the area of concern for humanistic attention, in spatial and geographical, rather than exclusively in temporal, terms. The movements of our time and of our country are movements in and out of territory to be moved in and off it, to try to stay, to try to establish new settlements, and on and on in an implacable dynamic of place and displacement that, in this endlessly mobile country of ours where the location of the frontier both metaphorical and real appears never to be settled, is still very much the issue.

This moment seems to me the central fact of human history, perhaps because our own experiences as migrants, pilgrims, and castaways in Eric Hobsbawm's short "century of extremes," which has just ended, have colored our view of the past so decisively, so politically and existentially. Often, as Bourdieu writes, sites or places—be it a problem suburb or ghetto or Chechnya, Kosovo, Iraq, or Africa—are phantasms, which feed on emotional experiences stimulated by more or less uncontrolled words and images, such as those conveyed in the tabloids and by political propaganda or rumor. But to break with accepted ideas and ordinary discourse (which on one very profound level is what humanist reading is all about), it is not enough, as we would sometimes like to think, to "go see" what it's all about. In effect, the empiricist illusion (which is so much the norm in contemporary media coverage of the world) is doubtless never so strong, as in cases like this, where direct confrontation with reality entails some difficulty, even risk, and for that reason deserves some credit. Yet there are compelling reasons to believe that the essential principle of what is lived and seen on the ground is elsewhere.

More than ever, then, we have to practice a para-doaxal mode of thought (doaxa: common sense, received ideals) that, being equally skeptical of good sense and fine sentiments, risks appearing to right-minded people on the two sides either as a position inspired by the desire to "shock the bourgeois" or else as an intolerable indifference to the suffering of the most disadvantaged people in our society. The suggestion is the late Pierre Bourdieu's, but it is useful for the American humanist too. "One can break with misleading appearances and with the errors inscribed in substantialist [that is, unmediated and without the modulated transitions I spoke about earlier] thought about place only through a rigorous analysis of the relations between the structures of social space and those of physical space" (123).

Humanism, I think, is the means, perhaps the consciousness we have for providing that kind of finally antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place, from text to actualized site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to reading and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explanation and utterance, and back again, as we encounter our own silence and mortality—all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search for knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation.

References
Preface

As this chapter is a part of this series of reflections on humanism, I'd like to explain why it is about only one work and only one author, who doesn't happen to have been American in the literal sense. Rather than continuing my remarks on humanism, I thought it would be best if I could concretely illustrate my arguments by looking at a work that has had a lifelong importance to me and, despite the fact that it appeared fifty years ago, one that still seems to embody the best in humanistic work that I know. Auerbach's Mimesis was written in German in Istanbul, during World War II, but it appeared in English in the United States in 1953. Auerbach came to America after the war and remained here as a professor at Yale until his death in 1957, an American humanist by adoption, as it were. There is an extraordinarily gripping drama to the author and book I am going to discuss, which I hope I can communicate to the reader of this set of lectures. Mimesis is the greatest and most influential literary humanis-