

The future of Humanities

Author : **Catherine MALABOU**

I do not intend to talk about the future of the Humanities in general, but to present a personal and thus necessarily partial approach of the problem. I will formulate it as follows: the frontiers between the Humanities and Science must be redrawn. This is because the most accurate concept of the frontier is currently being elaborated and articulated by science, and no longer by the disciplines that constitute the Humanities any longer. Science is gradually becoming a discourse on frontiers, on limits, and has thus begun to deprive the Humanities of their proper content or task : the reflexion upon frontiers and limits. Furthermore, I do not intend to talk about Science in general, for although we can be certain that this new elaboration of the concept of frontier and of limit is common to current mathematics, physics, medical science, etc, I will insist upon the field where this re-elaboration is the most visible and spectacular, that is in biology, and more specifically in neurobiology.

The future of any kind of discourse or of discursive practise, be it philosophical, literary or scientific, is linked with the plasticity of its limits and frontiers, that is, with their ability to receive new forms from the outside (their suppleness, their malleability) as well as with their capacity to bestow new forms to other discourses. The term plasticity thus designates both the receiving of form — i.e. marble is plastic, and the giving of form, such as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery.

It appears that the Humanities, especially continental philosophy, are not longer able to accurately think their own plasticity and that a dialogue with neurobiology, in which the concept of plasticity (under the name of neuroplasticity) is central. This dialogue is necessary in order for the Humanities to resist the threat that weighs upon them (i.e., their being designated as useless and unproductive), in order for them to avoid being swallowed, or eaten alive, by science without even being aware of it. How then can a genuine dialogue take place which would both respect the autonomy of each field and redraw their mutual limits and frontiers ? How can we think of a neuroplasticity of the Humanities that would bring some plasticity to the Humanities as well as some critical theory to neurobiology ?

In order to call forth a preliminary answer to this question, I will confront two philosophical texts, both devoted to the motive of the Future of the Humanities, the first one by Michel Foucault « *What is Enlightenment?* », and Jacques Derrida *L'Université sans condition, University Without Condition*. Foucault and Derrida both equate the Humanities with critique or criticism in general. For Foucault, since the Humanities coincide entirely with the field delineated by Kant as that of critique or criticism, they must be understood as the future of critique itself. Derrida agrees with Foucault and declares that "The new humanities or the Humanities to come should consist in a series of both critical and deconstructive works and actions". Further on, he continues this discussion, writing that the Humanities should remain the « ultimate place of critical resistance » [l'ultime lieu de résistance critique] » (14/204).

This assimilation of the Humanities with critique or criticism is due to the fact that critique, in the Kantian sense, is precisely a discourse on limits and frontiers.

« Criticism », according to Foucault, « consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits » (45). Rather than dealing with a specific content, the Humanities, for both Foucault and Derrida, are concerned with the issue of their own limits and with the meaning of the limit itself. Thus there is not really an inside or an outside of the Humanities because the Humanities are a series of frontiers between the inside and the outside, their specific status issuing only from this mobile and plastic operation whereby their objects are situated *as* frontiers and *at* frontiers. According to Foucault, « we have to move beyond the inside-outside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers. » (45) For Derrida too: “ [one] ... touches the very *limit between the inside and the outside*. One thinks *in* the Humanities the irreducibility of their outside and of their future. One thinks *in* the Humanities that one cannot and let oneself be enclosed *within the inside* of the Humanities. But for this thinking to be strong and consistent requires the Humanities. » (236)

Referring also to Kant, Derrida concludes that the future of the humanities depends on how we determine and dwell upon the very border between their inside and their outside: « On this border [the university] must therefore negotiate and organize its resistance. » (236) If we agree with Foucault that the Humanities deal with three main types of relationships — relations over things, relations of action with or upon others, and relations with oneself, then we will consider that their « objects » are formed by three kinds of limits: the limits of knowledge, the limits of political power, the limits of ethics.

My first remark at this point is that, for both Foucault and Derrida, the notion of the « outside » of the Humanities remains linked with a very vague concept of science that coincides for them with an enterprise of normalization, regulation and control. We are told to pay attention to the frontier, but we cannot fail to notice that one of the spaces delineated by this frontier, namely the « outside », coincides with the enemy: science. We must now ask ourselves: what kind of frontier always already rigidifies the meaning of the outside, and consequently of the inside as well? Foucault gives some examples as to what might constitute this « inside »: to the Humanities belong our reflections on « our ways of being and thinking, the relations to authority, relations between the sexes, or the way in which we perceive insanity or illness. » (46-47)

The three relationships I evoked above — which correspond to the axes of knowledge, power and ethics — appear to situate themselves on the border between two possible meanings: freedom inside, nature outside; works inside, labor outside.

Right from the start, the plasticity of this frontier is undermined right from the start by the fixity and determination of the spaces it is supposed to limit in a supple and malleable way. This problematic also appears very clearly in Derrida's conception of what he calls the « new Humanities »: « The new concept of the Humanities should include law, “legal studies”, as well as what is called in this country, where this formation originated, “theory” (an original articulation of literary theory, translation theory, philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, psychoanalysis and so forth). » (208) Yet it is unclear how these new crossings, in so far as they take place only within the Humanities, could now allow genuine crossings, genuine formations of plastic borders *between* the inside and the outside. Furthermore, although he speculates that

« departments of genetics, natural science, medicine, and even mathematics will take seriously, in their work itself, the question [he has] just evoked », Derrida does not give any specific indications about this concern (230). How can we explain this insufficient and unsatisfactory definition of the outside as well as of the future of the Humanities, the lack of plasticity at their frontier?

Paradoxically, this lack results from an insistence upon the very notion of plasticity itself. Foucault writes:

« if the Kantian question [of criticism] was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one : in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints ? » (45)

He is asking, in other words, how can we invent ourselves? How can we transform ourselves? » These questions, which obviously stress the plasticity of « ourselves », that is, of the human, of the Humanities, are positive to the extent that they imply a transgression of the limits declared impassable by Kant. The human has to form itself. I would like to explore for a moment this plasticity of the human that Foucault here brings to light. Though he insists upon the radicalization of his scope, Foucault is careful to explain that the very possibility of this plasticity was actually discovered by Kant. In 1784, the German periodical *Berlinische Monatschrift* invited its readers to submit answers to the question: « What is Enlightenment? ». In Kant's response — the only one actually published — philosophical thought was made to reflect, for the first time, on its own present, in the form of the following question: What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday? According to Foucault,

« [It] is in the reflection on "today" as difference in history and as a motive for a particular philosophical task that the novelty of this text appears to me to lie. And by looking at it in this way, it seems to me we may recognize a point of departure: it outlines of what we might call the attitude of modernity. » (38)

Foucault compares Kant to Baudelaire, who in *On The Heroes of Modern Life* declared: « You have no right to despise the present » (qtd. in Foucault 40). If there is such thing as a present for philosophy, consequently also for the Humanities and for criticism, this present cannot be a deduction but an invention: « Modern man is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secret and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. Modernity does not liberate man in its own being; it compels him to face the task of producing itself. » Modernity implies « a change that man will bring upon itself ». (Foucault 42, 35)

The human is plastic. This means that it gives itself its own form, that it is able to transform itself, to invent and produce itself, and that it is nothing but this very process of self-formation. And if the Humanities have to be at the frontiers, as we said to begin with, it is to the extent that, according to the plasticity of the human, they have to recreate constantly their own being and meaning. Transformation here doesn't mean the transformation of something preexisting but the very emergence of what has to be transformed. The plasticity of criticism implies the is a priority of fashioning over being, the priority of transformation over what has to be transformed. Enlightenment coincides with the consciousness of our plasticity that is of our freedom. We saw that for Kant, at the same time, this plasticity could not transgress certain limits, its own limits. Plasticity

cannot become a dogmatic metaphysics or a science. In order to remain plastic, plasticity has to respect the transcendental prohibition of any becoming scientific of critique or criticism. Criticism has to remain critical. That is why the transcendental is impassable, unsupersedable. There cannot be any science or any dogma of plasticity. The Humanities might then be defined as the disciplines that set out the conditions of possibility for a non-metaphysical and for a non scientific, that is for a transcendental, plastic self-invention of the human. Knowledge, political power, ethics.

Foucault agrees with Kant on all points except one, he contests the idea of transcendental impassable limits. He asks: what would be the adequate response today to the question "What is Enlightenment" were it addressed again to us? What would we say? Foucault has this very puzzling and difficult answer: contrarily to what Kant said in his time, we do have to transgress the transcendental, to displace the limits, consequently also to radicalize human plasticity. But does that mean that the Humanities have to open themselves to their outside, that is to science? Not at all :

« Criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal values, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. » (45-46) The possibility to transgress the transcendental coincides with the notion of the transcendental itself as a formal structure. For Kant, freedom is a universal structure; it is the transcendental possibility of plasticity. For Foucault, such a definition is still too dogmatic, too normalizing, it is rooted in the same principle than science, which is universality. Contrarily to what Kant says, freedom is historical and contingent. The invention of ourselves is a contingent process. In this sense, and this would constitute the future of the Humanities, we would have to build a non transcendental criticism. « Criticism is not transcendental »: this formula may seem extremely shocking, but it nevertheless opens the field of a new ontology: « a historical ontology of ourselves that must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical ». (46). Let us once again return to this very important passage:

« [The new] criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archeological in its method. Archeological — and not transcendental — in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all possible moral actions, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that (...) it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a [metaphysics that has finally become a science]; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom. » (46)

This analysis corresponds to what Derrida, in the *University Without Condition*, identifies as the task of the Humanities: the deconstruction of « what is proper to man » or to humanism (Derrida 231). The transgression of the transcendental implies that the very notion of limit or frontier will proceed from a contingent, that is, historical, mutable, and changing deconstruction of the frontier of the « proper ».

Let us now broach a final comment on the Foucaultian project by way of his conclusion. To deconstruct or transgress the transcendental means to *experiment (with) it*: « the historico-critical attitude must (...) be an experimental one. » (46) « I shall just

characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings. » (47) Here come the examples of « our ways of being, thinking, the relation to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness. » (46-47) The Humanities should then open the path for diverse thoughts and techniques of self transformation, of invention of the transcendental, of displacements of borders. Derrida, in the last part of his book, comes to the same conclusion; we should give to the Humanities an experimental dimension « with the help of gender studies, race studies and all kind of fields implying a critique of traditional subjectivity. »

The problem is that the very notion of experience is not explored for itself. To challenge the transcendental amounts necessarily to challenge the empirical, there is no transcendental without empiricity. It is clear that Foucault assimilates empiricity to history and contingency, and Derrida with deconstructive practices.

Both remain silent on the passage from the Kantian understanding of self-transformation to the deconstructive or archeological and genealogical one, from the transcendental to the contingent. What happened precisely that made this passage possible, that rendered the transcendental experimentable, that transformed the transcendental into a plastic material? What allowed the becoming contingent and totally plastic of the limits? What kind of transformation?

This never appears clearly either in Foucault's or in Derrida's discourse. They both speak of historical transformations of criticism without specifying them. I think that the event that made the plastic change of plasticity possible was for a major part the discovery of a still unheard of plasticity in the middle of the XXth century, and that has become visible and obvious only recently, i.e. the plasticity of the brain that worked in a way behind continental philosophy's back. The transformation of the transcendental into a plastic material did not come from within the Humanities. It came precisely from the outside of the Humanities, with again, the notion of neural plasticity. I am not saying that the plasticity of the human as to be reduced to a series of neural patterns, nor that the future of the humanities consists in their becoming scientific, even if neuroscience tends to overpower the fields of human sciences (let's think of neurolinguistics, neuropsychanalysis, neuroaesthetics, or of neurophilosophy), I only say that the Humanities had not for the moment taken into account the fact that the brain is the only organ that grows, develops and maintains itself in changing itself, in transforming constantly its own structure and shape. We may evoke on that point a book by Norman Doidge, *The Brain that changes itself*. Doidge shows that this changing, self-fashioning organ is compelling us to elaborate new paradigms of transformation.

The modifiability of neural circuit and connections renders the limit between the transcendental and the empirical for ever improbable. Neural plasticity is an empirical fact, the brain, according to Antonio Damasio, is an organ « representing the outside world in terms of the modifications it causes into the body proper (230) ». Biology deals with materiality and raw facts. But at the same time, because the very meaning of our biological being is indeterminacy, and consequently freedom, the brain is made of a transcendental material, perfectible, meaningful, autoorganized, open to the future. The organization of the brain is affected by experience, and therefore, it has to be exercised, experimented, and because of this nature of our brain, we are constantly rewired and

reorganized. It becomes clear that we henceforth cannot think of our relationships with objects, with the other or with ourselves without interrogating this self-transformable basis of our subjectivity.

We cannot understand the becoming empirical of the transcendental without exploring the space opened by neural plasticity. This means that the « outside » of the humanities loses its monstrosity to become the material exteriority without which criticism is reduced to the relativism and polymorphism of cultural studies. Reciprocally, the « inside » of the Humanities may renew their old conception of the plasticity of all frontiers.

In the *University without condition*, when he comes to define what the new Humanities may be, Derrida declares: we cannot predict what the future of the Humanities will be, if something new, a genuine event may happen, it will have to interrupt all horizon of expectation: « if what occurs belongs to any horizon, it does not occur, in the full sense of the word. As I have tried many times to demonstrate, only the impossible may occur. » (234) The future of the Humanities can then only be thought of as the improbable coming of the 'absolute arrivant'.

Are we then doomed to wait for the future of humanities to happen according to a messianic time in which it may as well not happen? Is it messianism that we want?

References

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Notes
