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The languages of the humanistic studies

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CLIFFORD GEERTZ:
On the Languages of the Humanistic Studies

This whole discussion of what the humanities are sounds old-fashioned to a social scientist. We stopped discussing where sociology left off and anthropology began and what the social sciences "are" a long time ago. And I would guess that to try to talk about definition independently of what turns on the definition is pointless. Somehow or other, we define things or subjects—humanities, Romanticism, art—in terms of some purpose which we have in mind. And we choose different kinds of definitional strategies and therefore different kinds of definitions depending upon what it is we are up to.

I just wrote down four examples, and there are fifty, I am sure. You could approach a definition of the humanities, for example, with a kind of pure-laboratory-preparation sort of notion of what is criterial of the humanities—uniqueness, subjectivity, and that sort of thing. And this would have certain uses; for example, if your concern is with philosophical issues—that is, if you are trying to investigate what uniqueness means. And it would also have certain uses—I do not say this in any negative way—ideologically as contra-science definition.

Another kind of approach, which has also been suggested and apparently was the one involved in John Higham's article, is a kind of extreme nominalism: that is, the humanities are sort of what people generally say they are. This is useful for academic divisions, for inviting people to conferences, and that is about as far as you need to take it for such purposes.

A third approach that has been suggested is an *ad hoc*, case-by-case inductive approach: You decide what the humanities are by looking at what people who have said they are humanists are doing, and see whether this coheres into any kind of a recognizable intellectual object. This obviously is useful for the self-image of the people working in the field, for defining the problems that have existed in the field, and so on. You can also talk about the interplay among disciplines as defining the humanities—what poetry, art, history, music, and so on have to give to one another. Thus, you can define the humanities in terms of interdisciplinary proc-

ess; by the way in which they are involved with one another and with the social sciences, in terms of the inputs they contribute to one another and the outputs they yield, in terms of the kinds of relationships to one another they have. This strategy would define the humanities as a kind of unity in terms of the sorts of relationships specific studies have among themselves.

Now I realize I have given only four approaches among many possible ones. But I think to talk about defining the humanities independently of purposes and ends is really not a very good idea.

Someone asked me at the end of this afternoon's meeting how this discussion differed from others that, say, the social scientists have, and I said I was struck, as an outsider, by the lack of any reference, in attempting to define the humanities, to what was going on in the fields of the people represented here. There has been a good deal of discussion of what the humanities are, but there has not been much discussion about what the movements of thought in literary criticism or in history and so on are. And I was thinking that an example of what I mean by the way a social scientist would more likely go at the same thing is the paper by the psychologist, William McGuire, in which he tried to show what was going on in social experimental psychology. I do not entirely agree with his paper, but he says they are moving people out of the laboratory into dealing with the kind of material humanists use. It would seem to me that *maybe* some people in other specialized fields represented here could do some of the same sorts of things to show which way things are in fact moving in the humanities or try to define the "humanities" they are involved in so that we have some notion about what is really at issue.

I think it is quite wrong to say that there is no audience for the humanities, whatever they might turn out to be. It is not true that only humanists read and look at paintings and so on. There is a very large intel-

lectual community in this country. When first-rate works of the humanities are published and written, whether they be Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* or some of Frye's work, I think there is a public response and a larger public than is usual for this kind of work.

The image of our society as a simple machine is a very undifferentiated and, if I may say so, from the sociological point of view a very simple-minded one. As a matter of fact, the humanists do have a function in society which is recognized and, when performed, appreciated. People do respond to you—not quite so much as they respond to the columns in the daily newspaper, but I do not think that is any reason for despair. They probably read you more than they do sociologists. I think at least one major function of the humanists is to lead people into the work, and lots of people want to be led into the work. Wallace Stevens is not that accessible to the average man, even the average educated man, but lots of people read him and would like to get further into him.

One of the reasons why the discussion is centrifugal is because every time we come upon a methodological issue we avoid it like the plague. We raise a fascinating question—that Keats can be treated effectively in synchronic terms, as a presentation of work, while Blake can only be treated in temporal terms. And then we say, this is only an empirical problem. This is exactly where the methodological investigation (and by this I only mean being reflective about what you are doing; I do not mean creating jargon, though we can do that if we wish), exactly where the methodological problem, should begin. What is the difference between Keats and Blake that they should respond to the critical eye so differently? This is the kind of question, it seems to me, we ought to begin with, instead of passing it over and saying it is just an empirical problem, and we all know the difference. *I* do not know the difference, and I would like to think further on it.

If you start thinking of what the problem between Keats and Blake means, you are going to get into methodological problems. And one of these is what "consistency" means. One has to begin to think about

how one determines "consistency" in a poet. What does this mean? Otherwise the whole proposition is just a tautology. I do not know anything about Keats and Blake on this level, so I am not trying to make any substantive contribution to this discussion. I am only saying that when we come across something of this sort, this is the place to start a methodological discussion.

A point on language. I think the pebble theory is extraordinarily simple-minded to be held by people who are supposed to be the custodians of language. Take a word which went through all the memoranda, "subjective." Even as an ordinary language term, "subjective" means so many things. Sometimes it means private as against public behavior, distorted as against objective in the sense of neutral balance. Sometimes it means phenomenological inside views as against public, outside, stereotyped views. Sometimes it means emotional as against detached. You use words like "subjective," and you do not unpack the concepts implicit in them; you do not explicate them. Again, this is where methodological issues, in a very commonsensical way—nothing social scientific or jargonish about it at all—ought to begin. Otherwise, you say the arts are subjective and you do not know, and we do not know, what is meant.

One aspect of the concept of "deep structure" is the difference between competence and performance. This is what makes it more than merely logical. The control of the base structures, which are neutral, is considered part of the basic linguistic competence of the human animal; and this is different from speech which is performance. Therefore "deep structure" is not just a logical structure to account for things observed. It is an argument that these competences are actually wired in; they are given. You can produce sentences according to these rules; you can make empirical rules.

Primitive societies are full of critics. It is not written stuff, but the notion that criticism did not exist before literacy is nonsense.

Is there a different way in which things are retained? I suggest that the step diagram of the synchronic present might be drawn as a spiral for the humanities because they proceed by achieving a very partial recovery of the past and then surging forward. That particular surge is exhausted, and there is another recoil to the past. This is a very selective thing. The New Critics rediscover the metaphysical poets and neglect the Victorians, and this sudden burst of new energy then exhausts itself and people rediscover the Victorians. You get this kind of surging back and forth. Using now the psychologists' difference between short- and long-term memory, by definition, the humanities (as Professor Weil suggests) have to have an elephantine memory and must never forget anything; they must keep open the possibility for this recoil to any material which may become relevant. Now obviously this is not possible in a total sense. But there has to be some way, even when the Victorians are not being read and are not relevant to what is really going on—as they were not so much in the high tide of the New Critics, for example—to preserve their accessibility. There must be somebody to keep them alive for the time when this particular surge forward is exhausted, and it is necessary therefore to return to them. So one must make the distinction in the humanities—and in the more humanistic humanities the more so—between short-term memory which is extremely selective, and in which I think in fact it is necessary to forget a great deal in order to make some advances, and long-term memory where it is necessary never to forget anything. You keep the whole enterprise going so that this particular surge will not be the last one.

In the sciences—again, the more scientific sciences, the more so—memory tends to be embodied totally in what happened yesterday. We do not forget Newton, that is quite wrong; Newton is in some way embraced

in more recent things because they are built on Newton's suppositions. The reason our students can accumulate it all is that somehow or other it is embodied in short-term memory. You do not need the long-term memory because there is no need, in order to be a beneficiary of Newton's discoveries, to read Newton, in the way in which Mr. Hutchins, at one time, thought we ought to go back and read the basic text. This is not necessary because somehow the latest physics textbook in some sense of the term embodies that advance.

Most people I know who have theories in the sciences (and I would imagine most people in the humanities too) are in favor of them and try to marshall as much evidence as possible to support them. In time the theories are eliminated as people criticize them; but the actual orientation most people have toward their work is to try to support it. Hypotheses in the sciences are always under evidence; they are always under inspection. To look at the way in which people approach their work in either the sciences or the humanities with this sort of negative notion—to say that what they are really trying to do is disrupt the sand castles they are building—strikes me as empirically wrong. They fight for their castles, as we all know, with great vigor.

There is a particularly telling case in Gombrich's treatment of Constable. The usual interpretation of Constable is that he just looked out there and saw the trees and painted them and so on, but Gombrich tries to show that Constable is really better understandable from other painting traditions on which Constable drew than from how the English countryside "looked" in some trans-artistic sense.

Gombrich has trouble at both ends when he makes the distinction between illusionistic and iconic art, because when you are talking about primitive art it is hard to know what the image is being matched to. And

it seems to me that this is a good example of how progress develops—you can see here where you might go next. What obviously needs to be expanded now is the concept of matching. The making side, the codes and so on, he has straight. But he has a rather narrow and, I think, culture-bound view of what matching is.

I think that if the concept of matching in art were explicated more, if it were broadened, if it were clarified, if the post-Gombrich sort of tradition were to be turned in the direction of evolving or developing a concept of matching which will preserve Gombrich's tremendous insight into art and this coding business in such a way that we would not be left helpless before non-illusionistic art (either iconic art, on the one hand, or post-impressionist art, on the other), we would see substantial progress. This is the sort of thing where even if we are talking about advance we can see where the problems are left by a thinker of tremendous power. Faced with Jackson Pollack, on the one hand, or primitive art, on the other, something needs to be done to carry this very valuable tradition forward and to make it workable for something rather wider than the particular domain—Western illusionistic art as distinct from Chinese illusionistic art—to which Gombrich has confined it.

In another essay—the essay *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*—Gombrich has a child who, he says, starts with a stick that looks like a horse to the child. It does not look like a horse; but it is a horse to the child, because he can ride it. This is why the Wittgenstein II thing comes to mind. So he rides it, he runs up and down the room, and after a while it is not quite satisfactory to him, so he puts an eye on it, and he puts a tail on it, and so on. So abstraction proceeds in this view from the most generalized representation toward more and more matching as you make the situation; then you match it to the horse. It is not really true that this is a Hegelian view of the interplay of forms at all. It is a theory about the way in which abstraction moves: that is to say, from abstract conceptualizations that are making things—icons—toward realism, toward imagery, toward figuralization, which is the matching side

of the question, rather than the other way around. This is quite contra-Aristotelian—they cannot both be right. I am not here to say who is right, but they cannot both be. In the case of the hobbyhorse—which is just a metaphor here obviously—either the child starts trying to make the stick look like a horse and then abstracts it, or he starts with the stick and tries to make it more like a horse. It is logically impossible to go both ways.

As to this humanistic notion of balance in taking care of all the texts, I am not so sure that it really stands up. If it is real oil, then I do not even mind misreading. I do not want to try to defend Leslie Fiedler, but I might defend D. H. Lawrence's readings of American literature which are rather cranky in some ways, but are also extraordinarily perceptive. As distortion plays an effect in art, so I think it plays an effect in criticism, and the notion that only a balanced judgment, only one which will take care of all the text, only one which will meet scientific canons is a valid one is, I think, a somewhat dubious proposition. Some of the best insights we have from "humanists" into the artistic and literary tradition have come from guys who were half-crocked, and this, I think, is something that has to be taken into account. This having to make sure an interpretation accounts for all kinds of things strikes me as eliminating some of the really powerful ideas we have. So I would say that if it is real art, which is a good question, then it is real oil, and it does not matter too much whether some parts of the poem or some other parts of the text will not yield to a particular view. You simply have to try to forget about them.

It is very necessary to point out that we should not assimilate anyone who makes a contrast between deep and surface structure or who is a-historical to structuralism, because the thing that is characteristic of Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky is that they are arguing for deep, pure, formal structures. Others who make deep-surface analyses—Freudians, Jungians, mythological

critics like Frye, whom I would not call a structuralist—are looking for content. People like Lévi-Strauss are arguing for pure, syntactic forms, deep structures in the pure sense without interpretive content. Lévi-Strauss is looking for deep binary oppositions, which are supposedly universal, and so on and so on. These people are formalists as well as analysts of the contrast between deep and surface structure. There has been a long tradition, of course, of the a-historical approach: the Jungian tradition, the Freudian tradition. And in anthropology there are a whole lot of people who are looking for what you might call a content substrata, and it is a quite different thing. I do not say they have nothing to do with one another, but I do think that if structuralism in a somewhat narrow sense is to mean anything, it must be this notion of logical transformations between surface equivalents from which you are then allowed to derive neutral base structures. If you do not have this, then structuralist means anybody who is not a sheer empiricist.

I do not agree that Lévi-Strauss does not have an ontology, but that is a factual argument about Lévi-Strauss. But there is no doubt that Chomsky does. If we accept generative grammar, must we accept the return of the nativist? Must we have innate ideas? Do we have to have all this jazz? Having committed ourselves to generative grammar, we are committed then to this kind of rationalism.

Chomsky and the Chomskyites have turned to two things: One is childhood acquisition of language and the other is asking informants whether sentences are well-formed, whether they are grammatical. I. A. Richards began to do this sort of experimental work years ago by asking people about accepted poems: What they thought they meant, whether they "liked" them and why, and so on. Is there anything going on in the humanities these days where people are trying to see how people actually react? I am not talking about sitting here and reasoning how they react to *Hamlet*—but about asking kids how they respond to simpler poems or what people will accept as a poem or a drama. If humanists are going to approach the social

sciences and get anything from them, this is one direction in which I would say they ought to move.

Henry Nash Smith said earlier that the humanists are ex-clergy, and he seems to want to restore them to that role. I am unwilling, personally, to accept them in such a role. I do not think they are moralists any more than anybody else. What they can do, as I think Hillis Miller and others are trying to say, is to get us into the documents where these values that you supposedly want lie, and they are hoping to make these documents accessible to us, to get us into them, to find the values that are there. If they get us into *Mrs. Dalloway*, we may find vacuity at the center, but the point is we will find whatever is there. If there is something in Wallace Stevens, if there is something in Milton, whatever it is, their job is not, it seems to me, to be secular priests of our society; it is somehow to get us into contact with the luminosity of the documents, to see the values they contain—and I think there are values, of course—so that we can get out of the poems the values that are in them in this rather incorporeal sense. I was talking to Arnold Stein about Milton and *Othello* before the break, and I learned a lot about what Satan means and about the whole business of the moral career of the self-deceptive man. This is what we want from humanists. We want some way to get at whatever this treasury consists of. I do not think that people who are trying to devise methods to get us into the text are abdicating a moral role. Indeed, I think that is their moral role, because frankly, without offending anybody, I would accept no one here as a moral censor on my life. I might accept Shakespeare, but I am not likely to accept humanists as such.

A "professional" comment about luminosity and some of the problems about simply bracketing so completely the object of study may be useful here. As an anthropologist I am likely to be on the side of cultural conferral of meaning on things. If you look, as I have done, at another society where the luminous objects

you are looking at are not luminous for you, you have a lot of digging to do on a number of levels. I have done comparative work on Islam in two countries. Obviously the texts and so on that these people respond to are not luminous to me, so my initial empirical problem is to find out what they respond to and what they see in them. And you cannot do this, if you are outside your own tradition, simply by sticking to the text; it is utterly impossible—take my word for it. If you do not take a historical picture of how they grew up, if you do not have some psychological analysis, if you do not have some notion of their value system, you just will not get anywhere. You will just make it all up out of your own head. You will transfer your own concepts to your informants.

I think the same thing is true, though it is hidden, when you work in your own tradition; and therefore, though I am willing to start off with a notion that there are luminous things—because I know that there are, that there are for me—I am not willing to stop there. I think there is a slight fear, which I do not quite understand, at least on the part of the phenomenologists, that if we begin to subject a privileged document to ordinary explications—if we subject it to history, if we subject it to linguistic analysis, if we subject it to a host of other things—the luminosity will somehow disappear. This shows rather a lack of faith in what is supposed to be the intrinsic quality of the document. I do not think this is true. This is the sort of thing that used to worry Biblical critics a great deal—that as soon as you looked into the Bible, its power would be destroyed. Of course to a certain extent this happened, but to a certain extent it did not. If the object is really luminous, I should not think that knowing something about it beyond its own value will necessarily destroy its hold on you. What does destroy its power and its hold on you, from my point of view, are certain social changes, and this issue is something that we perhaps might talk about.

One comment on privileged documents. Meyer Abrams said he does not mind problems, but he does

not like mysteries. In the same way, I do not mind privilege, but I will not stand for undefended privilege. If I disagree with someone over the intrinsic value of a document, I cannot be persuaded to understanding by such comments as: You are wrong, or you are insensitive, or you are an ape looking in a mirror. If somebody is going to say, "This is great," and I think it is awful, I am willing to be convinced. But I need to be persuaded by something besides an entirely intrinsic kind of argument into accepting as valuable something I think does not come to much.

Just a little remark about the theme I used in making my remarks about Lawrence. If you take the view that I have been taking, that the role of the humanist is to bring people into the work, you must realize that it makes the humanist enterprise a very dangerous business. I did not find the fact that your students liked *Mrs. Dalloway* encouraging; indeed, it shows that they have a good sense of nullity, a feeling for the nihilism and the vacuity and despair which are at the center of *Dalloway*. But if you talk about Cèline's writings or *Pisan Cantos* or a lot of other things which are terribly powerful imaginative works, you are not exactly recommending to them the good and moral life. You are putting them in contact with a document of extraordinary power, which is also of extraordinary corruptive power. You are not just playing around with the good little values of the middle class. You are confronting what man has done and expressed about himself both negatively and positively, and you are trusting, I suppose, in some faith that ultimately people who have access to this will come out better than they were before—though I would not like to guarantee it. I do not think you can take the view that the humanities are a kind of substitute religion even at this level, because I think if you are going to teach Cèline, you are going to be in trouble; there will be a lot of people who will believe him. If you allow people to read Cèline and you help make them read him better than they read him before, you are doing dangerous things.