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An Historian's Notes for a Miloszan Humanism

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“O my love, where are they, where are they going”

— Czeslaw Milosz, “Encounter” (1978, 3)

The awkward term “humanism” has served as the title of too many movements and ideals, and seems drained of significance, like a wrinkled old balloon. To speak of revising and retrieving the term for a new form of humanism, as will be done here, is to invite many possible misconceptions. In a strict, traditional meaning, in the context of Renaissance humanism and its later reflections, humanism refers to an attempt to affirm the dignity of the human spirit, and to renew modern culture by a return to antiquity. These goals were to be achieved through the study of human things (*res humana*), by means of scholarship and literature, history and the arts. In regard to the possibilities for humanism today, and drawing on the poetry and essays of Czeslaw Milosz, I wish to suggest the following theses:

- A new humanism, appropriate to our world, and to a hoped-for world civilization, can be intellectually and spiritually grounded in ‘old humanism’ and its medieval and Renaissance background.
- A new humanism would be a valuable position, even a source of joy, because of its purposes: to provide resources for personal liberation and the confrontation of certain poisonous contemporary cultural and political realities with ancient alternatives.

- A Miloszian humanism would prove beneficial because it would neither project an ideal humanity nor offer an historicist project for transforming humans into a new humanity.
- Such a humanism, further, would rely on real contact with the living and the dead, which is an important dimension of Milosz's poetry, neither wishing humans away nor idealizing them, and implying the importance of broad study of the human tradition.
- The goal of humanism would then be, not to *humanize the world*, but to craft an engaged, highly cultured and scholarly standpoint, and thus to *humanize the scholar*, or rather, to *humanize the self*.

This is to suggest a view of literature and scholarship as the deliberate unfolding of dimensions, and the search for possible connections to various traditions of the human past as part of our own efforts to achieve personal liberation, “penetrating this forest of ruins,” in the phrase of religious historian Gershom Scholem, who sought to rescue the Jewish past from oblivion, and thereby to find a foothold in a terrible present time—for Scholem, the 1920s. In a letter to Meta Jahr in 1920, Scholem said that he had experienced a merger of his historical scholarship and kabbalism, claiming, perhaps ironically, that he had become a *makubel* or kabbalistic practitioner (209). Any humanist approach that would be valid today must greatly expand the range of literary traditions and antiquities under study, something that has recently been called for in an admirable essay by Milan Kundera, “Die Weltliteratur.”

The humanist is a specialist in rare fragments, which are collected out of the distant past, arranged and explained like beautiful seashells. Scholarship, when it is true to the past, causes these fragments to glow as if with renewed life, thus allowing them to become part of our own spiritual world. Since the Middle Ages, the pursuit of a spiritual form of life often involved the juxtaposition and interchange of reading, reflection, prayer and meditation. A growing awareness, cultivated in the school of Chartres, that “truth is the daughter of time,” as Bernard of Chartres exclaimed, led to the incorporation of history and study of the human tradition as part of a developing humanist approach to scholarship. Bernard's motto, *Veritas filia Temporis*, we may note in passing, was a learned reference to the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius (see Chenu 162; Ginzburg 27).

Any broad discussion of humanism must offer some reflections on the

revival of interest in the Greek and Latin classics, a hallmark of humanist culture, during the Middle Ages and also during the later flourishing of humanism in the Renaissance. Various modern attempts to revive a moralising, normative humanism, such as the New Humanism of Irving Babbitt, have failed. After all, even the classics-loving poet T.S. Eliot could not bear the relentless moralism of the New Humanism (see Torrance 175). The tendency of humanism to adopt a normative tone of remote grandeur has provoked a contemporary reaction against any possible continuation of humanism. But humanism can find better paths for itself by returning to literature, notably the works of Czeslaw Milosz. This would be the frame of a kind of humanism, much less certain of itself, and less given to propounding dicta for others to follow, in the style of earlier humanisms (see White 426–27).

I wish to trace a path to a Miloszian humanism starting from an examination of the early appearance of humanism in the Middle Ages, on to the Renaissance and the modern era, in order to consider the possibility of returning to the idea of scholarship as a way of life, or as a contemplative path. The literary historian and professor of poetry at the Sorbonne, Émile Faguet, once noted the ancient connection between books and contemplation, complaining that in the modern world “life is not literary because it is not contemplative” (qtd. in Antonio Perez-Rioja 5).¹ Faguet wrote in 1913, in what now seems like an antediluvian age, before the First World War. The old medieval ideal of the contemplative life, given canonical expression by the sixth-century author Julian Pomerius, still resonated easily with Faguet. First of all, however, it is necessary to confront the impasse faced by humanism since the late twentieth century.

Humanism and the Flowers of Evil

In 2000, the critic George Steiner was invited to look back over the twentieth century, in an interview with the French weekly *L'Express*. He pointed to the barbarism of a century marked by death camps, torture, deportation and famine, extending from 1914 to the terror-regime of Pol Pot and the Rwandan genocide. The twentieth century proved to be the defeat of civilized culture, according to Steiner: “Education: philosophical, literary and musical culture, did not impede the horror. Buchenwald was situated a few kilometers from the garden of Goethe” (qtd. in Simonnet).

Jorge Semprun, who was himself interned in Buchenwald, later remarked in his memoir *Literature or Life* on the geographic and moral irony of this conjuncture. Semprun observed the terrible coincidence that brought Léon Blum, socialist, Dreyfusard, and author of the *Nouvelle conversations de Goethe avec Eckermann*, as a prisoner to the Ettersberg forest—"the quirk of fate that led Blum as a prisoner of the Gestapo to the very place where the conversations between Goethe and Eckermann occurred" (96; see also Blum).

The original *Conversations with Eckermann* are a monument of the maximal period of humanistic education and of a classicizing, humanistic love affair with the ancient world. The *Antike* was an ideal artistic realm that could be permanently reawakened and emulated. As Goethe remarked, commenting on the nature of Greek tragedy, its subject matter was "humanity in its whole extent" and so we should always study great writers, but "above all things, the old Greeks, and always the Greeks" (149–50). For Goethe, as for Schiller, the world of classical Greece was a beautiful world. As viewed from Weimar, all things in ancient Greece sparkled and were more worthy (see Bruford 86). For Semprun, in contrast, the experience of radical evil cast doubt, not only on such enthusiastic ideals, but on the continued possibility of literature, and his memoirs record his endeavor to fight his way back out of these ruins.

George Steiner strongly implies that the proximity of Buchenwald to the Oak of Goethe was far more than a coincidence: this happenstance illustrated the fact that the ideal of humanity developed during the Enlightenment, and expressed in the political ideals of the Eighteenth century, had completely failed to humanize the world. The inhabitants of Weimar who became Nazis and built the camps were in some way the heirs of Goethe and Schiller. Moreover, according to Steiner, the so-called humanizing effect of the liberal arts also seemed doubtful in the extreme. The humanities have become an isolating preserve in which the real world is kept at bay. While reading *King Lear* or the *Fleurs du Mal*, Steiner remarks, "I do not hear the cry in the street" ["je n'entends pas le cri dans la rue"] (qtd. in Simonnet). His best student, Steiner declared, was the one who completely rejected his teaching and went off to become a doctor, serving the poor in China. The anecdote reflects the skepticism of an old professor whose life had been wagered almost entirely on literature, and who arrived at the end of a terrible century marked by a sense of futility about the isolated con-

templation of the scholar in his or her study. But Steiner's criticism of literature, in the course of his own profoundly literary life, also brings to mind a saying of the anti-modernist and aphorist Nicolás Gómez Dávila, that "there is no humanism that does not carry with it a critique of humanism" (197). No mature and fully developed humanism can fail to incorporate the edge of critique, or fail to examine its own false paths. We can reflect that Steiner's criticism is humanistic in its deepest orientation, as well as in its sense of rebellion and disquiet.

The question raised here is whether it is possible to discover a path for humanistic scholarship adequate to contemporary existence, yet still capable of offering the *ressourcement* provided long ago by medieval and classical humanism. As Robert Torrance has noted, we live in an era that has been defined as "not only post-structuralist and post-modernist, but post-humanist and indeed even post-human" (168). The possible collapse of literature, experienced with a sense of horror by Semprun, has become for many scholars an occasion for playful adventures in the ruins of old systems.

Humanism has been criticized along the lines of Steiner's views at least since the end of the Second World War, in a Europe which had seen, in Steiner's words, "the triumph of the inhuman at the heart of the century" (xi–xii). Traditional ideals could be maintained only with tremendous effort, or abandoned as no longer pertinent to the human condition. As early as 1951, for example, the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss argued that Europeans of the Enlightenment, who often spoke of *humanity*, did little more than project their own values and aspirations as a universal ideal of civilization: "the concept of an all inclusive humanity, which makes no distinction between races or cultures, appeared very late in the history of mankind and did not spread very widely across the globe" (Finkelkraut 2000, 5–6; see also Finkelkraut 1995, 55). The ideal of humanity therefore, despite its universal claims, was destined to remain a narrow European concept with limited impact on world consciousness. This has been one of the most devastating arguments raised against humanist traditions. So now, in the cultural conditions of "postmodern pluralism" as Gianni Vattimo argues, the very concept of humanity and study of the humanities seems suspect, unphilosophical, or undemocratic (3–5). In the 1960s, the ideal of humanism (along with the concept of the Rights of Man) was dismissed as a feature of petti-fogging bourgeois ideology (Judt 565). Thus

we arrive at Foucault's derisive comment that "Man is an invention of recent date" (387). If the constraints and disguises inherited from classical thought could finally be discarded, the early Foucault believed, then the unwelcome notion of humanity would at last be "erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (387; see also Nehemas 170–73).

The most negative and vitriolic statement of this anti-ideal is that of Lacoue-Labarthe: "Nazism is a humanism in so far as it rests upon a determination of *humanitas* which is, in its view, more powerful" (95). Torraine is right to remark that nothing could be more anti-humanistic than this phrase. Lacoue-Labarthe's strange saying was not intended to decry Nazi ideology so much as to sweep away the last crumbs of humanism from the respectable tables of the intellectual world, thereby to create more room for Heidegger and Heideggerian anti-humanism. Lacoue-Labarthe thus evidently shared Foucault's revulsion at "the moralizing swamp of humanistic sermons" to be heard in post-war Europe, and Foucault's anti-humanistic reaction to those sermons (see Finkielkraut 2000, 28). It is equally interesting to note, in this connection, the contemporary turn from humanism in the neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth, in favor of what Barth termed the "humanism of God," meaning "God's friendliness to man as the source and norm of all human rights and human dignity" (125). In contrast, however, Foucault's perspective neither provided for a heightened awareness of justice, nor awakened energy for a greater engagement with the world, nor offered a defense of human dignity. There was an element of dandyism in Foucault's reaction against what appeared to be a thoroughly exhausted humanism. Postwar efforts to pick up the threads of humanism often seem feeble in retrospect.

In his desire to find a path back from the horrors of the twentieth century, the Prussian historian Friedrich Meinecke famously suggested that "Goethe Communities" should be created in postwar Germany, so as to encourage the reestablishment of the spiritual life of Germans by "turning again to the altars of our fathers" in respect to religion. Meinecke hoped to bring about for his fellow Germans "an intensified development of our inner existence," by looking back to the period long before Hitler's Germany, when the generation of Goethe "strove for and to a large degree realized the ideal of a personal and wholly individual culture. This culture was thought of as having at the same time a universal human meaning and content" (113, 115). Meinecke's humanist project is so well known in part

because it appears so woefully inadequate to the situation of post-war Germany, and because it suggests a feeble and unrealistic reply to the monstrousness of the war and the radical evil unleashed by the Nazis. Moreover, German high culture and *Bildung* were not above reproach, since these values were held up as a fetish even by the Nazis, whose officer corps continued to wipe tears from their eyes at productions of Beethoven in the wartime concerts of the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler.

So the question remains: is it still possible to explore “the opalescent notion *humanitas*” in the phrase of Ernst Kantorowicz, by means of deep study in the human tradition (1957, 451)? As the Carolingian scholar Alcuin explained, when we turn our attention to mankind, we discover a complete amalgam of dignity and abjection. If we wish to understand why humanity was created, the repulsive side of man should be put to one side, and “we should consider the nobility of the interior man” (col. 1101). Alcuin, the illustrious scholar of Charlemagne’s court, therefore imagined a transcendental, universal human identity based on the concept of the invisible soul and its likeness to God. The medieval and Christian roots of the figure of humanity are evident throughout the periods of scholarly and theological transit from late antique to later Renaissance and Enlightenment images of humanity. However, in the modern era, even long before WWII, such ideas began to lose their lustre. Under the impact of anthropology, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the wide examination of human types and human cultures had begun to dethrone those venerable medieval assumptions. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, for example, after comparative research on the mentality of archaic societies (which he ordinarily termed “primitive”), concluded that there was no “identity of human nature” (75–79). According to Lévy-Bruhl, “since we have rejected the philosophies of history which provide a unifying principle in the form of theological or at least teleological ideas, the conception of humanity as a whole escapes us” (qtd. in Cazeneuve 24). Thus we really must ask whether it is still possible, or meaningful, to propose a humanism in the absence of a clearly defined essence of humanity.

Recently the late Paul Ricoeur pointed to the dangers that arise for legal and political theory from the dethronement of “humanity” and the disenchantment of “Man.” With the defeat of those universal ideals, and the intellectual and political reactions against the legal and metaphysical inheritance of the Enlightenment, it has become difficult to theorize, let

alone defend, the existence or the importance of human rights (9). The defeat of the opalescent notion *humanitas* threatens to leave us without a legal subject of rights, and perhaps without a subject of history or literature as well. The problem is acute for historians, who want to validate their continued moral and intellectual preoccupation with the dead, their constant efforts to handle their belongings and books, and their efforts to preserve and understand their ephemeral voices.

The Meaning of the World

The hesitation and doubt of George Steiner are completely supported by the events of the twentieth century, and yet a quite different voice was raised in the wake of World War II in the poetry and essays of Czeslaw Milosz, who endured the siege of Warsaw, and went on to live a life devoted to literature. It may be possible to outline a Miloszan humanism, which resonates with earlier doctrines and hopes.

The fifteenth-century humanist Nicholas of Cusa once spoke of his mystical search for God as a “spiritual hunt” (see Matusevich 249). As Pierre Magnard explains in his essay “La chasse de la sagesse,” the moments of discovery that Nicholas experienced would fill him with a sense of gratitude and jubilation. Milosz conveyed in many of his poems a similar sensibility, of a hunt for the ethereal and receding essence of the world—the effort to close one’s fingers around the past even as it dissolves, and to capture its meaning. Recalling days of exploration with a fellow poet and friend long ago in Poland, Milosz intoned in his poem “Winter”: “Great was that chase with the hounds for the unattainable meaning of the world” (1986, 36). In the spiritual hunt for the meaning of the world we never experience a feeling of arrival or satisfaction.

While Milosz often examines the meaning of nature, and a multitude of theological questions, the object of this “chase with the hounds” for Milosz is almost always the elusive, faded being of the human past. Here, in “Hans Post,” he finds it captured in an old Dutch painting:

Hans Post, his Brazilian landscapes painted around 1650.
 . . . what moves me is a contrast between the earth and a
 group of people dead long ago . . . Brazilian Indians who
 disappeared both as particular beings and as a tribe. Soli-

arity with the tiny figures in whom our hopes and our troubles persisted for a while and can be looked at through a magnifying glass. (1986, 138)

One is reminded of the quite similar insight of Marguerite Yourçenar, observing and reflecting on the engravings of Piranesi: "let us consider for a moment, magnifying glass in hand, the miniscule humanity which gesticulates on the ruins or in the streets of Rome" (101). Human existence of the ancient past seems very frail and distant, lying beyond the screen of the artist's canvas and skill, and yet we wish very much to see into those antiquities, and to examine these human traces, which after all are real.

Solidarity. The dead have a claim on us with their long-forgotten passions and foibles, and their unwonted delicate breath continues to stir the hair on our necks. This regard even extends to the realities invoked by art and literature. In the poem "Undressing Justine," Milosz discovers and makes love to a character from an old Polish romance novel. The being of this delectable character is also human, and therefore worthy of being cherished: "Though you never existed, let us light candles / Here, in our study, or in our church" (1995, 46). This aspect of Milosz's thinking seems to reflect a sense of being haunted by men and women of the past. In his last great work, *Second Space*, the poet's own soul seems to grow ever more familiar and intimate with the dead, and with the characters of literature, as he approaches the end of his life and in a setting of quavering transparency finds himself becoming capable of crossing and re-crossing the borders between memory and actuality, life and death.

Milosz is one of the most important writers on the subject of time and memory since St. Augustine, ranking beside Proust, and his work therefore has the effect on an historian (and on literary historians and critics) like the smell of woodsmoke on an autumn day, a sense of homecoming: a presentiment of dignified beauty in the study of the past, and a spirit of appropriate regard, of decorum and benevolence, toward the dead. As Milosz reacted against the effects of Communist rule in Poland, especially on his artist and intellectual friends, he also rejected all versions of historicism. This was the lesson he took away from the demoralizing and dehumanizing effect of Marxist historical dogma on his friends and fellow writers in Poland, whose attraction to Communism seemed to sap their fellow-feeling and to deprive them of normal contentment and good will. He

described the destructive historicist mentality in this way, in his long essay *The Captive Mind*, written shortly after the war, about spiritual and intellectual conditions in Soviet-dominated Poland:

Let a new man arise, one who, instead of submitting to the world, will transform it. Let him create a historical formation, instead of yielding to its bondage. Only thus can he redeem the absurdity of his physiological existence. Man must be made to understand this, by force and by suffering. Why shouldn't he suffer? (10).

The result of Communist doctrine on his friends and acquaintances was a mental attitude that would willingly destroy mankind, if need be, in order to save it.

He was dismissive of those who would use history to vindicate programs that smash those who stand in the way: "He who invokes history is always secure. / The dead will not rise to witness against him. / You can accuse them of any deeds you like. / Their reply will always be silence" ("Child of Europe," 1980, 64). The dead require us to speak for them. This charge is laid on the poet, and the historian, both of whom are subject to visitations by the dead. Milosz found himself continually haunted by the upwelling of people out of the past: a woman walking with a red umbrella in a sunlit field or an old priest blowing out candles in a dark church. It could happen as he gathered apricots: "I reach for a fruit and suddenly feel the presence / And put aside the basket and say: 'It's a pity / That you died and cannot see these apricots'" ("Gathering Apricots," 1991, 54).

This is to notice something subtle in the fabric of life, which points back into the depths, and offers itself as a tenuous path toward the meaning of the world. A journal entry from the notebooks of Elias Canetti seems to express a similar idea: "His belief: that nothing is ever lost, particularly nothing that has taken place between people" (39). Such a presentiment is the *Spur*, the vestige, always looked for by the historian. The *presence* is sometimes felt even by historians at their reading desks in archives or libraries. The painful sense of the tangible reality of the dead, the *being* of someone who has been hurt and forgotten, is something that often attracted Milosz's attention and worry. "He asks forgiveness / from

the spirits of the absent ones / who twitter far below / at the tables of buried cafés" ("Many-Tiered Man," 2004, 34).

Milosz's essays and poetry are redolent of the oldest reveries of humanism, but give rise to startling new combinations. In his work we find a deep type of humanism united with a stark Manichaeian view of a disenchanting nature. Wartime experiences sharpened his awareness of mankind's capacity for bestiality, and thus the optimistic view of universal human nature is totally missing from his work. With painful lucidity, Milosz suggests that by proclaiming human equality we only protect ourselves from observing the inequality that surrounds and supports us, albeit unjustly, so that "a true and deep experience of the truth of human equality is a rare and difficult thing" (1975, 163). Unable to affirm the crystalline structures of Thomistic theology, he was a master of cautious exploration and self-doubt, rather than a master of assertion. Instead of the traditional pieties of humanism, Milosz unfolds tactful, delicate portraits of individuality, especially of the long-ago lives of those who have died.

If there is a Miloszian humanism, it differs from traditional humanism in another regard: despite the classical balance and restraint of his work, Milosz found classicism in the arts to be tiresome, and in any case inaccessible and even forbidden to an artist living in the midst of the modern world and the twentieth, or worst, century, which we would be right to call the *pessima aetas*. In this sense, Milosz found himself far from the sunny Greece of the Weimar classical period. The task of poetry has changed, and must now serve as a witness to the age, and thus poetry can probably no longer find its way back to the sublimity of a superbly heightened language or the stability of perfected forms. The Sublime may no longer be available to the artist, or so he once suggested to me, although it can be argued that a new and more lean and subtle Sublime takes shape in his poetry (Moore 1985, 95). Because of his skepticism about classical forms, and his disdain for merely antiquarian interest in the past, Milosz said that he had a "quarrel with classicism" (1983, 61–75). Poetry, and the artist, are like the mysterious "road-side dog" who inscrutably watches humanity over the centuries as the human comedy goes by along the dusty roads (Milosz 1998, 3).

In the writings of Milosz we find new connections between words, books, and contemplation, all of which are brought forward in the service of memory. Memory: the capture of human reality in recollection and lan-

guage, and especially remembrance of the dead, was for Milosz one of the guiding purposes of poetry. Memory, and the ethical imperative of recollection, would have to be at the center of any revision of humanism, and any historical scholarship based on it.

What Does Humanism Say?

To quote the medieval historian and monk Jean Leclercq, “nothing is more constant in history than the ephemeral” (2004, 829). The ephemeral nature of past reality, and of human traces is a burden that historical research must try to carry, even if it is clumsy, and less capable than poetry of handling those past lives with sufficient delicacy and gravity, or of capturing their reality in fine nets of language. The awareness of the ephemeral, and its continued presence, is a part of the fierce moral stance of Milosz’s poetry. The Orkney poet George Mackay Brown arrived at a similar understanding in his own poetical works, and thus a brief excursus is called for here:

I have a deep-rooted belief that what has once existed can never die: not even the frailest things, spindrift or clover-scent or glitter of star on a wet stone. All is gathered into the web of creation, that is apparently established and yet perhaps only a dream in the eternal mind; and yet, too, we work at the making of it with every word and thought and action of our lives. (qtd. in Fergusson 289)

This expresses the essence of the Miloszan humanism that I am attempting to sketch in this essay: the endeavor to capture the world of coming-to-be and passing-away, and above all, to hold and defend the traces of the fragile “human reed” of Pascal’s famous fragment, and thereby to cooperate in the establishment, and the continuous creation of the world. As Pascal put it: “A human being is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed” (72). For Milosz, the poet can play a role that has a particular spiritual importance, a defense of the weak reed, that is based in a sense of “identification with people of the past . . . a feeling of fraternity that helps us penetrate the curtain of time” (1983, 113).

One can also point to the medieval and classical roots of Mackay Brown’s poetry, as expressed in the Homeric thirst and disorientation of

The Sea and the Tower, or his exploration of an Anglo-Saxon twilight, with references to the Venerable Bede, as in the poem “Bird in the Lighted Hall”: “Bright door, black door / Beak-and-wing hurtling through, / This is life” (1996, 117). Mackay Brown’s poems are craggy with the landscapes of northern islands, and Viking-obsessed. He believed that his poetry emerged out of a “pool of silence” which he asserted was the ultimate source of all poetry: a poem was “a cold pure round of silence; a fold; a chalice where, having tasted, a man may understand and rejoice” (qtd. in Murray 4). Indeed, the inscription on Mackay Brown’s tombstone reads: “Carve the runes / Then be content with silence” (Fergusson 288).

We can admire the fluid Ciceronian writing, with its sheer vitality and amplitude, of the Renaissance authors, but it seems false and impossible now. Thus we turn instead to the stark galactic Hellenism of St. John Perse in the *Anabasis*, in which we can perceive the antiquity of our world, with its Alexandrian adventures in the Middle East: “Omnipotent in our great military governments, with our scented girls clad in a breath of silk webs” (53). Or similarly, we might study the ancient themes of historical guilt and reconciliation in Seamus Heaney’s Sophoclean play, *The Cure at Troy*. Here we can point to a different rhetoric—classical works without the brilliance of Weimar classicism, but instead seemingly fragmented or dessicated by salt and sun. A language that arises out of an atmospheric silence, as described by Mackay Brown, or which has been kept hidden in a desk drawer during times of political oppression, as in the cases of Zbigniew Herbert or Anna Akhmatova, seems more adequate to the mysterious and degraded nature of our own political times. There is a silence of subterfuge and resistance that still draws on the resources of classical themes. In the face of historical and political devastation, poetry has reflected a newly intense, even desperate classicism, as in Akhmatova’s poem “The Death of Sophocles”: “That night an eagle swooped down from the skies onto Sophocles’ house. / And the garden suddenly rocked with a cry of cicadas” (139).

The approach to the ancient past has a vibrant and urgent timbre in the hands of certain recent historians as well. The elegant, lucid treatises of Pierre Hadot, notably the essays collected in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, reflect an historical approach to classical antiquity that is grounded in a precise knowledge of context and of relevant traditions, which make it possible to reactualize the past on the way toward fuller self-understanding.

As he once explained in an interview, only the cautious interpretation of texts, avoiding all anachronism, can allow one to be confronted at last with the original lustre of historical reality. Out of the effort at objectivity arises “a supplement, a surplus, which is to find there our spiritual nourishment” (2001, 115). The method, based in traditional erudition carried out to a formidable degree, allows us direct access to the thoughts and writings of the ancient philosophers, which appear once more in their living originality, by no means paraded by as a troop of “great thinkers” whose eminent words we should accept as authorities, but offered to his readers in the nature of a living challenge, opening new perspectives which can lead us out of the impasse of our own times. This theme appears in Hadot’s commentary and translation of the *Manual* of Epictetus. Having broached the difficulty and even the unattractiveness of the treatise, Hadot concludes:

And wide vistas open before me: a glimpse that our vision of things is totally mythical, that we are terrified by scarecrows that we ourselves have fabricated, that our passions are too often the fruit of illusions, that we refuse to see reality as it is; but above all I can sense that I am able to change that, to become aware of prejudices, conventions, habits, mirages, of which I am the victim. It is in this power to change my judgement of things that my liberty resides. (159–60)

Medieval Humanity and Humanism

For early medieval thinkers, the concept of *humanitas* often inspired little more than outrage at human disobedience and depravity. Consider the coiled gloom of Agobard, writing in the Carolingian ninth century: “All lovers of the world, all seekers after trifles or earthly things are enemies of God [*inimici sunt Dei*]” (440). Agobard followed St. Augustine in regarding humanity as a mere “lump of perdition” [*massa perditionis*]. While some will enter the Heavenly Jerusalem, most will remain in that city of evil men, the *Civitas Diaboli*. Medieval scholars developed the theme of the nature of man in the dozens of books that were written during the Middle Ages using the same title, *De anima*, really a genre of writing, which gradually added complexity and benevolence to the picture of hu-

manity made in the image of God—man the inventor and builder, man and woman the possessors of reason. Rabanus Maurus exclaimed that with the gift of reason mankind “girded the cities with walls, invented defensive weapons, wrapped himself in a diverse array of garments, established roads in trackless wastes, passed over the seas with the diligence of art” (col. 1111). Reflecting the cultural ambitions of the Carolingian Renaissance, the great teacher Rabanus was full of appreciation for the special destiny of humankind, and was happy about it. A sense of active change and community also emerged as part of the basic flow of history.

Out of the rocky soil of ninth- and tenth-century monasteries a later flowering of studies would emerge, along with a new spirituality that was nourished by the new scholarship: an “integration of [the monastic ideal] to the most lofty and subtle mystical doctrines . . . with their ancient basis” (Leclercq 1964, 86). In the monastery of Cluny, Carolingian authors were studied alongside patristic authors and ancient historians. Books were highly prized, and richly decorated; bejewelled copies were made. According to Leclercq, the monks loved these books: “their content, their beauty, their utility. They helped the monks to pray” (1964, 122). The connection between books and contemplation also lies behind Leclercq’s significant claim that “if humanism is the study of the classics for the reader’s personal good, to enable him to enrich his personality, [then the medieval monks] are in the fullest sense, humanists” (1974, 170). At Cluny the old horror of human depravity was to some extent defrosted, as we can see in the creation of the benevolent and almost democratic Feast of All Souls’ Day. This liturgical celebration was a step along the path of recognizing and defending humanity, not as a *massa perditionis*, but as worthy of love, requiring and meriting defense—the help of monastic prayer in this case (see Moore, “Demons”). The highpoint of medieval humanism came in the culture of teaching and learning of northern France, especially in the cathedral school of Chartres of the twelfth century. Here the Seven Liberal Arts were studied in a humane atmosphere that allowed John of Salisbury to accept Virgil as a source of ancient wisdom (see Haskins 100–6). We find Ivo of Chartres, for example, ready to use the term “humanity” in a good sense (see Morris 317).

Throughout these developments, the reading of Aulus Gellius can be taken as a typical symptom of humanism. The *Attic Nights* is a work delectably interesting, unclassifiable, and somehow pointless. The best rea-

son to read it is the intense pursuit of literary achievement and joy, as well as for anecdotal contact with philosophers and other great persons of the classical past. Among the dense forest of citations from classical authors to be found in John of Salisbury, Aulus Gellius occurs frequently, alongside Juvenal, Seneca, Cicero, and the historians Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Livy (1909, 1:29).

Even while opposing the dangerous and crude political forces of his day, John of Salisbury found it vital to refresh his thinking in the literature of antiquity and to observe, as if through a magnifying glass, the tiny, long-vanished figure of Cato the Elder, as he appears in the *Attic Nights*. John's political framework and aspirations seem, from our vantage point, very distant from those of the ancient figures he admired. Although he was present at the assassination of Thomas à Beckett, John's hatred of tyranny had been shaped earlier, reflecting his faith in the sacred value of Roman law and its place at the center of Christian European politics. His resistance to tyranny was connected to a "deep sense of the spiritual significance of the international unity of Christian civilization under the universal Roman law and the universal spiritual jurisdiction of St. Peter's successor" (Webb 69). John concurred with the perspective of canonists and the Glossators of Bologna, whose views the modern historian must distinguish from the mental world of the Roman jurists of old, and the original context of Roman law. From its medieval beginnings, humanism was not merely a curiosity about the ancient past, but an earnest search among its monuments and ruins for new resources that might prove valuable in the present day. Knowledge of the ancient past allowed John of Salisbury to find a spiritual homeland, and thus to turn his face toward a different, seemingly better horizon of hope during a dark age of politics and an era of brazen assassination.

While continuing to draw on Carolingian authors in his *Policraticus*, John turned to classical literature as a source of political knowledge and to support his pursuit of a philosophical life: according to the long, self-referential poem *Entheticus Maior*, many works of the ancient pagans are valuable and can help us along our path, while Christian authors surely complete them and lead to our true happiness (see Nederman 41–43). The connection between scholarship and the search for happiness was an essential theme of John's humanism, and a characteristic note in the *Policraticus*. We already catch glimpses of the St. Jerome of the Renaissance,

working away at his writing desk, in his eternal, wood-paneled study, as the patron saint of humanists (see Liebeschütz 25, 67).

Humanism is a pilgrimage across the human and natural world; in a search for human dignity and, let it be said, for personal liberation in the study of the human tradition: literature, philosophy and history, especially the literature and history of antiquity. Humanism desires to keep hold of the delicate frail things of the world and of humanity. Thus it is not surprising that since the Middle Ages, the study of the humanities has so often had to engage in a confrontation with crude social forces. Study of humanity and the natural world was undertaken to achieve an ideal of humanity in one's own life, which is often forgotten by scholars. It would be reductive to view humanism as nothing more than a strategic academic stance, although this was certainly one feature of the Renaissance world of letters, as of our own.

In the fifteenth century, humanists such as Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples combined the cultural harvest of the ancient world (Aristotle, Hesiod) with the mysticism of Jan Van Ruusbroec and the somber piety of the *Devotio moderna*. Seemingly in contradiction to Christian views of fallen human nature, Renaissance humanism always sought to develop within Christian norms, and in that regard was a direct extension of medieval humanism. Here we find a gesture that involves the study of human life, and the effort to achieve an ideal of humanity in one's own life, inspiring new efforts in the arts and literature (see Renaudet 145–48; Hyma 262–64). Yet all of this was linked to a new spirituality. Lefèvre d'Étaples became a student of the Dutch mystics while serving as librarian of the Sorbonne, and combined this spiritual quest with classical studies: thus his editions of Aristotle and of the works of Nicholas of Cusa depict the two wings of his interests and research. A certain gothic stiffness of soul did not prevent him from finding a spiritual home in Florentine humanism with its emphasis on neoplatonism.

Wessel Gansfort, a central figure of the *Devotio moderna*, could likewise draw on his knowledge of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, and even the curious work of Aulus Gellius. Such humanistic combinations served in the nourishment of individuals, as a new, worldly version of the traditional monastic contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*), or even the *vita solitaria* of the hermits (see Kantorowicz 1965). Renaissance humanism emerged directly out of earlier medieval humanism, and the

monastic quest for a philosophical life of direct confrontation with the truths to be discovered in patristic and classical studies (see Leclercq 2004, 838). This development went hand in hand with the rediscovery of the concept of *humanitas*, incorporating the insights of authors from antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The paths open to modern humanism are supported by the scholarship and poetry of earlier times. In his introduction to the *Laments* of the Renaissance poet Jan Kochanowski, Stanislaw Baranczak describes that poet's complex relationship to Christian orthodoxy and classical tradition in a form that could equally well apply to the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz:

Just as in *Laments*, expressions of religious doubt that border on blasphemy can be pronounced because their speaker still thinks, argues, levels his accusations, or asks his questions in the symbolic language of religion, so the breaking of the classical rules gives the poetry positively new force and import because the rules are still recognized as an abiding presence. (xix–xx.)

The importance of the humanist tradition has never lain in repetition, but in the discovery of new critical and artistic paths. As a result, the *classical* has scarcely been exhausted as a source for “ennobling thought” or for personal cultivation. For Kochanowski, the classical tradition offered a form of language and a frame of meaning for his grief after the death of his beloved daughter. As Milosz would argue, the classical forms of language can no longer serve. Nevertheless ancient themes and ancient literature are a means of ensuring our contact with the dead. As an aphorism of Gómez Dávila has it: “Literature is not merely a game of fantasy. The literary dimension is no superficial aspect of the world, it is the very depth of things” (31). And Milosz speaks of the realm of literature as a refuge that is strange and complex, somewhat embarrassing, and yet a valuable source of spiritual interiority for those who suffer in the midst of history. Literature was, for Milosz, a “tanglewood”

which had provided refuge for generations and was more real than any visible world. . . . How to explain to foreigners that he lived through years of war and terror only in ap-

pearance present but in fact residing where Nature and History have no access? ("Tanglewood," 1998, 89).

Across the entire period examined here, from the Middle Ages to the modern era, lines of connection between literature and historical study of the human tradition were constantly renewed and rediscovered as sources for contemplation and self-knowledge. The poetic frame has proven fruitful and valid, shaping memory, bringing it to lucidity and awareness, and thus enabling self-knowledge, as in B.H. Fairchild's recent poem "Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest": "In his fifth year the son, deep in the backseat / of his father's Ford and the *mysterium* / of time, holds time in memory with words / *night, this night*" (7). Historical study can find similar paths, and offer profound opportunities for reverie and the search for wisdom. The practice of historical reflection can become a spiritual discipline that sets the historian and the poet apart from the lies and complicity of the community, to oppose the "power of forgetting," as Milosz describes it in the little parable "A Historian's Worries" (1998, 151). This power of forgetting is part of the corrosive effect of time. Human lies and forgetfulness cooperate with corrosive time, and can tear down human reality and grind personhood into dust, or even, such was Milosz's constant fear, dissolve it into the chaos of non-being.

Humanism, as the study of classical and medieval literature and history, as it developed from the medieval period, through the Renaissance and into the Weimar Classical era, was also a spiritual and philosophical quest for self-awareness, and an attempt to grasp at the meaning of the world. A love of books quite naturally became a constant element of the humanist attitude. Twelfth-century humanism, in the expression of Ernst Robert Curtius, is a type of study which, "like every true humanism, delights simultaneously in the world and in the book" (315; see also Torrance 173). In the following lines of Mackay Brown's poem "December Day, Hoy Sound," the book appears as repose and culmination:

Look, the crucible is cold,
 Look, the manuscript
 Sifts pages across the great oak table,
 The sheaves are in the barn.
 A book is heavy with jewels and icons. (2001, 107)

Similarly, a Miloszan humanism would mean to study and contemplate reality, and thereby to aspire to liberation from the bindings of history, and the lies of the community. Facing the world of passing-away and coming-to-be, we can aspire to knowledge of ourselves and our fellows, even across the boundaries of death:

We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the road.
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive,
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they going
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder. ("Encounter," 1978, 3)

By paying careful attention to the lives of others, living and dead, real and fictional, we may yet be saved, and learn how to *humanize ourselves*.

Notes

This essay is dedicated to Czeslaw Milosz, and, it is hoped, has been conveyed to him by obscure means. Research was completed with the help of a fellowship at the Herzog-August Library in Wolfenbuettel, Germany. Thanks to Madeleine Levine and Eileen Joy who read earlier versions of this essay, and to Christine M. Neufeld and Ian Aebel, who offered so much valuable help.

1. All translations of modern works and original sources are my own, unless otherwise noted in the bibliographic reference.

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Abbreviations:

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