

Review of: "The Countertextual Peripeteias of the Contemporary Humanities as a Political Challenge"

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REVIEW of "THE COUNTER TEXTUAL PERIPETEIAS OF THE CONTEMPORARY HUMANITIES AS A POLITICAL CHALLENGE", by DANIEL SABOTA.

When I was invited to review this article, I immediately accepted, because after a quick glance I got the impression that its subject was Humanism and its fundamental values in the contemporary academic world, a subject that is very close to me; however, by carefully reading the article I did verify that it really has nothing to do with Humanism, much less with humanist values, but rather with the so-called contemporary *humanities* and their place in the academy, which, according to the author of the article, it must be expanded to accommodate all kinds of interpretational disciplines based on non-written languages. This requirement, from the outset, seems to me a bad idea; however, my role here is not to debate with the author about the validity of his ideas or philosophical proposals, but merely to review his article, and for this reason, I will leave aside the question of the intrinsic value of the ideas that the author defends, and I will limit myself only to reviewing his way of presenting them in this article.

Daniel Sabota's article begins with the observation that in the broad field of the Humanities, a good number of "turns" have taken place in recent decades, which have allegedly reconsidered its focus or its area of study, or at least have added new topics for academic research. But, has this really been the case, the author wonders, or is this endless succession of "turns" nothing more than frivolous and passing fashions? I would have responded immediately that some are perfectly serious and legitimate new approaches to study, while others are frivolous and opportunistic (and hopefully passing) fads; however, this is not the type of answer that the author is looking for, who prefers to develop a reasoning that legitimizes all these turns, as a whole, from their basic foundation. To do this, he contrasts the notion of "return" to that of "turn". The argument goes like this: the difference between "turn" and "return" is that the *turn* can go in new and completely unexplored directions, but the *return* necessarily means recovering something that was already present, although possibly forgotten. Hence the question: should the Humanities be understood, in the strict sense, as a manifestation of Western thought and the concrete cultural history of Europe and its direct descendants, or can they be imagined, *in the broad sense*, as a general reflection on our human condition, applicable to any age and to any people? In the first case, non-Western thought is not part of the humanities, nor has it ever been, and therefore cannot "return" to them, nor can they take a "turn" in another direction without losing their reason to be; in the second case, the very broad reflection of the humanities is not limited to the European or the Western world, but can encompass everything, and can "return" with the same ease that it can "turn" in any direction, since these "turns" ", in such a broad conception of the humanities, would almost inevitably be a return to things once already present in any human reflection on their world.

Accepting one or the other model depends, according to the author, on a preference for a certain type of vision of man. If it is accepted that "humanistic knowledge" goes far beyond the formal rules that define Humanism historically, then it can be assumed that all the profound questions that man has asked himself about his own nature and about essential human problems, in any time and place, have a humanistic background, and therefore, the Humanities can make any theme their own, and return to it by any possible path, and in that case, there are a multitude of "returns" in any basic theme related to men and their world; on the other hand, if Man is imagined as an always unique and unrepeatable creature, in constant self-invention, then it is perfectly conceivable that there are ways of thinking about the human being that have never been tried before, and therefore, in these cases there are no "return", but true new and unpredictable twists. Man understands and creates himself through self-knowledge. The Humanities, if understood in this way, reflect the curiosity and active knowledge of men towards themselves and the world in a universal way, although they derive directly from European Humanism. In both cases, however, "turn" or "return", the historical European framework of Humanism is seen as too narrow for the contemplated possibilities.

All this question about the validity, or not, of the Western humanist model as a universal model is really something fundamental in the discussion about the relevance of humanist values in the contemporary world, and it is something extremely complex, to which it is not easy to answer, much less if the answer is intended to be simple and quick, which is precisely what the author wants to do in this article. I, for my part, will not even try to offer an answer to this complex question, and will limit myself to pointing out why the one offered by this article fails.

The author of the article, as it is easy to imagine, is decidedly inclined to assume that Humanism, and therefore modern Humanities, must encompass all manifestations of the human, regardless of era, culture or geography. The human condition, after all, is universal in scope, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that Humanism is as well. But here is a fundamental error at limiting the concept of "human" that derails all the reasoning that follows. The author, relying on Markowski, associates "human nature" with the *humanitas* of the humanists, which was the goal of *paideia*, that is, of education for a virtuous life that the humanists sought, and therefore claims that since *humanitas* and "human nature" are equivalent, the aim of humanist education was to "truly make human" its practitioners, that is, to develop, through education, their full "human potential", and since this education was a uniquely European model, elitist, and very limited in its conception of the "human experience", clearly this is a problem that must be remedied simply by extending the model to more diverse and extensive forms of human life in general. But all this reasoning is wrong, for this simple reason: the humanists, both the ancient Greeks and Latins as well as the Renaissance humanists, clearly distinguished between the *human*, which were those essential characteristics that separates every person from animals, and which are already present as a foundation for all Humanity, at any time and culture, and *humanitas*, which is an education for virtue that only a few achieve through their personal effort.

Therefore, the sense of universality of *humanitas* is actually limited: it is universal only in the sense that *anyone* can aspire to it, but since in order to achieve it that person necessarily has to practice virtue, it is evident that few will be able to achieve it, and in this sense it cannot be universal. No reference is made in Sabota's article to this necessary relationship between *humanitas* and virtue (a virtue, naturally, linked to the cultural values of the Western world, and specifically, of the classical European world), and therefore it is easy to assume a fictitious universality in the application of this concept.

Hence the suggestion that there may be many different humanisms, as many as there are different cultures in the world, and that they are based on a reflection on man and his role in the world, but that they do not necessarily have to involve the essential characteristics of historical European Humanism, such as rationality, freedom or creative ability, above all literary. In any case, the argument presented by Sabota takes its own "turn" at this point, moving from classical European Humanism to modern academic Humanities, as if they were synonymous, or at least, as if they were so closely related to each other that what is valid for one is valid for the others. This is another mistake that I will talk about later; for now, I stick to the development of the argument as presented in the article.

The author intends to resolve these questions by establishing a "bridge" between the basic notions that he has chosen from the beginning, the "turn" and the "return", and for this he chooses the idea of *peripeteias* that appears in his title. Likewise, the idea of "countertextuality" comes into play here, which is a characteristic that, according to the author, is shared by various themes of the Humanities, and which means an opposition, or collision, with the text, that is, with the world of writing and the way in which writing has conditioned our idea of knowledge. These countertextual aspects cannot *return* to the Humanities, conceived in the broad sense, because being countertextual they necessarily presuppose the existence of the text, and for this reason, they could not exist before the invention and popularization of writing, and they cannot "return" to the concepts of the pre-writing world, however much there were (in this broad sense) "humanist" concerns in it. No idea prior to the invention of writing can be countertextual or return to the Humanities. From these warnings, the approach that the author wants to develop is clear: his text appeals to the "countertextuality" that he sees in certain facets of Humanism to defend the idea that there can be Humanism without the need for written culture, in opposition to the classical humanist idea that higher (and written) European culture is a defense against barbarism ("barbarism", here, does not have an intrinsically moral aspect, but merely a cultural one, as a lack of knowledge of the most refined language, the written one). In the author's vision, to understand the humanities more broadly is to aspire to a broader understanding of man.

With the notion of *peripeteia*, it seeks to recognize that with the countertextuality the humanities break with the designated path (take a turn) by turning against themselves, but they return to recover something lost due to their own limitations (in this case, conceiving the ideal humanist man as *homo litteratus*), thus also making a return. Countertextuality implies a clash between the humanities "in the strict sense" and the humanities "in the broad sense". The humanities in the strict sense took a positive turn on writing, but in doing so they began to ignore a set of values that had been present in them since before the advent of writing, and abandoned these values (a negative turn) in favor of the writer; however, with the countertextuality, there is a return to those old values.

But the really important part of the article starts from having established the legitimacy of the *turns*. According to this article, the fundamental turns that the humanities (not Humanism) have taken would be the following:

The "rhetorical turn", that is, the relationship of rhetoric with the theory of argumentation.

The "performative turn", on "speech acts", that is, the performative capacity of language itself.

The "memory turn", key in studies about orality.

The "mediatic turn", about the media and the way they affect the culture of a society at a specific time. Its influence on politics and society.

The cultural and "post-colonial" turns, on the alleged problem of Eurocentrism, and the goal of "Restore the truth", the alleged objective of the anti-Eurocentric discourse.

The turns "toward (material) things", corporeity of the dancers and various cultural objects, with a more or less real relationship with archaeology, anthropology and social sciences.

The "folk turn", derived from the previous one.

The "emotional" and "somatic" turns, with influences from feminism, and "spiritual" movements and trendy New Age.

All the previously stated turns have in common the criticism or rejection of the "logocentrality" of classical humanistic studies, criticizing the idea of man as an essentially rational being, the primacy of the logos, the idea of history as progress, systematic knowledge, science as a criterion of truth, technique as a definition of art, etc. (However, although all the turns against textuality have all of the above as common elements, it is quite obvious that they do not have them to the same degree, with the same sense, with the same radicalism, etc. It is essential to really clarify this, since it cannot be assumed that all of these turns are equally legitimate, or for that matter, equally illegitimate).

The countertextuality of these mentioned turns reaches, and challenges, the very support of contemporary academic Humanities, according to the author. This countertextuality, says Sabota, challenges the anthropological-metaphysical assumption of Humanism, which has been and continues to be the "ideological" substratum of the Humanities. But here we return to the simplification error that I mentioned before, when I said that Sabota constantly confuses Humanism and the humanities. The modern humanities, as they exist in today's universities, have nothing to do with classical Humanism, because, despite their name, they do not come neither from the classic humanist concept of *humanitas*, nor from the concept of *Man* of the humanists of the Renaissance; they come, rather, from the ideals of the Enlightenment, and above all, from the notion of systematic knowledge of positivism in the 19th century. It is this positivist vision of the nineteenth-century world, based on the idea of a systematic, orderly human knowledge, rationally focused on progress, with aspirations for universal knowledge and with a linear conception of the scientific progress of all knowledge, what Sabota really criticizes; only that he mistakenly pretends to attribute it to classical Humanism and its values, without realizing that positivism and its vision of a systematic knowledge of Man are, in reality, profoundly contrary to the spirit of classical Humanism.

But, in addition, there is another very obvious problem with the argumentation of this article: the author denounces the "ideological substrate of the humanities", but without considering for a moment that he is also speaking from his own ideological postulates, and that in doing so, he is terribly simplifying the cultural foundation of the humanities to represent it according to current prejudices, especially those of today's egalitarian discourse. For example, the author speaks of "the literary and protextual bias of the humanities", but without ever assuming that there are also prejudices against the humanities and textualism. Likewise, the perfectly arbitrary demand that "no privileged language should exist" is simply

another attempt to establish a new privileged language, that of radical equality. Or Foucault's demand that the Humanities "have the right to say everything", evidently seeks to dissolve the sense of humanistic value by reducing it to a question of "rights" and, once again, a forced demand for "equality". Humanism's "ideological" presuppositions in favor of written form and literacy, after all, are the result of a long historical process that cannot be suddenly dissolved just because a new theory deems it "unfair" to expressions not centered in the literalness of speech. That is why some of the simplifications used in this article are absurd, such as claiming that the language of Humanism is a language of deliberate "exclusion", that is, the predilection for a language that "does not use the vulgar people", as if *being exclusive* were the goal of humanist language, instead of its aspiration to expressive quality and argumentative clarity.

Many of these ideas, especially those most attached to mandatory egalitarianism today, seem to come from Markowski, the author most cited in the article's notes, rather than from Sabota himself. They are, of course, concepts emanating from the densest contemporary egalitarian ideology, and are closer to a populist political discourse than to a philosophical reflection on culture and its values, such as the statement cited above "There should be no privileged languages", or the one that affirms "Humanism flourishes best in democracy", which the author never tries to argue or explain, but merely affirms as if they were self-evident "truths", despite the fact that the history of true Humanism tells us exactly the opposite: both the humanist discourses of Classical Antiquity and the Renaissance were privileged languages, the product of an elitist and highly educated world, with which democracy had nothing to do, while in our most modern and democratic times, humanism has disappeared completely, or is in the process of doing so.

The same thing happens when the author affirms that humanists, or even, in general, men of letters, are people somehow "incapable of facing the reality of the world", simply because they are used to reading books and reflecting from their readings. The "isolation" of the literary community is described in the worst possible terms, as if writing or reading books were a "renunciation of the world", and not an action located *in the world itself*. According to the author, the Republic of Letters is something similar to the life of monks inside a cloistered monastery, and no one has the inclination or capacity for coexistence with other living human beings, much less for cooperation with them. Sabota says: "Exactly this way of life – *vita solitaria*, *vita contemplativa*, *vita literata* – became a model of understanding the "humanistic" subjectivity that opposed the world, action, the body, matter, nature, people as a nameless mass, and city crowds". Of course, no mention, naturally, of the balance between "active life" and "passive life", which was one of the clearest aspirations of the Humanism known as "rhetorical Humanism" or "civic Humanism", of the 15th and early 16th centuries, and that has been thoroughly explained by authors such as Ernesto Grassi, among others. Nor is there any reference to the fact that the main component of the virtues that constituted classical *humanitas* was precisely the ability to teach, help and guide others, which was something that the person who possessed *humanitas* did through his words and personal example. Nor is there any comment on the relationship between the discursive capacity of language with politics, both represented by Rhetoric. None of this seems to concern Sabota, who very clearly has something else in mind when he speaks of "humanism", and which evidently has nothing to do with Humanism, humanists or even modern humanities, but rather with an image of a medieval monastery, with monks taking refuge in it to escape "the temptations of the world", or something along the same lines.

Now, regarding the set or list of “turns” in the field of the humanities that the author mentions, it could be objected that, although the list is more or less complete, *not all of them are true “turns”*. To discuss this point, one would have to start by satisfactorily defining what a “turn in the humanities” is. Is it something that is born *from within* the humanities themselves, and that abides by the defining principles of humanistic studies, even though it adds new things or gives them a different direction, or can it be considered a “turn” something that is imposed on the humanities *from the outside*, and that is implemented in the academic programs by mere external political pressures? Because both cases appear in the list offered by Sabota, and the author seems to consider them all to be equally valid. In fact, for this author, apparently, something genuinely belongs to the humanities if it is taught at a university in the Humanities Department, and there is no need to go any further with this definition. As is to be expected, there are many university professors of humanities who would in no way agree with such a premise.

A central problem with the position that this article assumes is its “all or nothing” attitude when considering academic positions, theories of knowledge or university politics, or even the history of humanistic thought itself. With the idea of the “turns” of the Humanities, one apparently must accept that if the idea of turns can be justified, then automatically every one of those “turns” is equally justified, without making any distinction of legitimacy or relevance between them. The same happens with the anthropological or archaeological studies that try to understand the reality of a culture without resorting to the review of textual documents: if one grants validity to these studies, then, according to the premise that drives this article, one would have to grant the same validity to any other activity that approaches the exploration of the human condition without going through the texts. Here it all comes down to textualism or countertextualism, where the reader is tricked by the article into the false conclusion that if one accepts that there are problems or limitations in humanistic studies strictly focused on analyzing textuality, then one must accept without doubt the validity of any countertextual approach to the “exploration of human experience”. But things, of course, are not so simple.

To begin with, I want to make it very clear that I am in favor of some of these non-textual studies, without adopting any “countertextual” ideological position. One thing does not necessarily lead to the other. It is very clear that paleontology, anthropology, mythology, comparative studies on ancient religions, on oral traditions, on ethnography, etc., are not based on the study of texts for the most part, and yet no one disputes their validity and its legitimacy as a means of learning about specific aspects of the life and society of ancient peoples or contemporary marginal peoples. Here, then, there is no need to resort to “countertextuality” to justify the validity of these studies and disciplines.

On the other hand, the foregoing in no way justifies the validity of things as varied and mutually contradictory as the theories of “postmodernity”, Derrida’s “deconstructionism”, Foucault’s anti-State radicalism, feminist or gender, or, above all, “identity” or “post-colonial” ideologies, which simply have nothing to do with the premises that generally identify the humanities, much less with humanist values, with which they are clearly in contradiction, or simply deny them out of hand, as does the anti-“Eurocentric” discourse that characterizes many of these “post-colonial studies.”

But what matters to the author is something else. It is, it seems, bodily disciplines, such as performance art, dance, “body language” studies, explorations of the relationship between the body and spirituality, and other things that obviously have nothing to do with the humanities. But, of course, this is precisely the clear objective of the article, to advocate for the

admission of all these activities in university teaching programs in the Departments of Humanities, citing the supposed "enrichment" of humanistic studies by expanding its academically recognized activities in all directions. This idea closely follows, or coincides with, the famous claim of the U.S. art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto, who claimed that the *ad nauseam* multiplication of "art languages" actually "improved" and "enriched" the art world, simply because it increased the options available to the consumer and gave them more choice (which is comparable to imagining that if a dozen fast-food outlets suddenly opened in a lavish and elegant neighborhood with some great restaurants, the food world of that area has been "improved" and "enriched" because now there are more options to choose from); but he also claimed that the new "art languages" complemented the traditional language of the art canon, and that if someone valued a canonical work, like, say, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, one could better understand it and see it from new perspectives if next to it had a "Mona Lisa" by Andy Warhol. For obvious reasons, this is something extremely improbable (although not entirely impossible, since precisely the "new languages" do not allow *a priori* to make a definitive judgment). The same is true of the Humanities. The only forceful judgment that can be attributed to them is the assessment of their canon, precisely because we know it and it has stood the test of time; as for the ambiguous innovations that explore "breaking new ground" and exploring in all directions, who can take something for granted in advance? Not against, *but not in favor either*.

Finally, regarding the accusation that Sabota makes against contemporary academia, and specifically against the Departments of Humanities, considering them a closed community, without new ideas, more concerned with hierarchies than with innovation, and incapable of reforming itself, I have to say that I completely agree. Of course, I do not agree with the solution that he proposes (enlarging the circus and opening the door even more for the entry of all kinds of "unconventional" activities), but I agree with the diagnosis of the disease. However, here a question inevitably arises for the author: if the current situation in the Humanities Departments is so bad and mediocre, how does it benefit the performative and bodily activities that he favors being included in the academic curriculum of these departments? Apart from creating jobs for some teachers who want to dedicate themselves to these subjects and boosting the egos of those teachers with the gain of supposed academic prestige, I don't see how else there can be a benefit to the performative disciplines themselves.

To make my objection clearer at this point, I'm going to set aside the performative and bodily disciplines (which someone might assume don't interest me enough to value them properly) and defend the same position with something that matters a lot to me, like it is art, and in particular painting. Of course, painting has its own pictorial languages, although they do not depend on the text, and it can perfectly express humanist ideas, with *a true humanist sense*. In fact, both classical Greco-Roman sculpture and Renaissance painting, especially in Italy, played such an enormous role that they often equaled, and sometimes surpassed, the textual works of poets, playwrights, and philosophers in expressing the ideals and values of Humanism. So, considering this, should painting and other visual arts be taught in Humanities Departments in universities today?

I think that history of art and art criticism should be taught, without a doubt, in the university, as well as Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics, but while the latter clearly belong to a Faculty of Philosophy, the former can be attached to a Department of Humanities in a more or less general way, depending on the specific characteristics of each study plan. In the end, they can be established with equal legitimacy in both a Humanities Department and an Art Department. But all these disciplines

observe and reflect on art from the *outside*, that is, from the text. Reflection is necessarily done with words, in a text, and within the limits and possibilities of textual language. As for the practice and direct teaching of art, be it pictorial or any other, its place is not in a Department of Humanities, but in an art school, whether academic or not.

Here it is important to distinguish between a philosophical reflection on art, which can be based on the study of other texts or of art itself, as art objects, but which necessarily must be expressed textually (it cannot be otherwise!), and the practice of art, painting or anything else, that the artist himself does. The painter has to learn to paint, that is, he has to learn his trade, his technique, his materials and methods, and he has to learn to reflect on and value his own art, but this can be done in a painting workshop, in an ordinary art school, in an Academy of Fine Arts, or in the Art Department of a university, and he could even do it self-taught. I think that, of all these possibilities, the least suitable is the university Art Department, simply because the official career in one of these Departments is not aimed at learning to be a good painter, but at obtaining a university degree. And, of course, a painter does not become good with a degree, but with a good trade, technique, experience, discipline and creative ambition. It is very clear that pictorial art has a very rich history of many centuries of creating great works of art, and the painters who made that history did so without ever having to go through a university. In this, art is very different from Law, which historically has always been linked to universities since their emergence, or exact sciences, which today cannot be learned without the infrastructure and laboratory equipment that only a university can offer. On the other hand, art does not need the university to develop, as it has never needed it, and the fact that there is now the possibility of doing a university degree in art is something very recent, with unclear purposes and results more than doubtful. If one is looking for good artists with talent, originality and good ideas, it is much easier to find them in an ordinary practical teaching school than in a university Department. And by this I do not mean that higher education is meaningless for the arts, of course. But it seems very clear to me that the true higher education is that offered by an Academy of Fine Arts or a Music Conservatory, not that of a university department governed by bureaucracy and technocracy.

I think the previous example about painting can be easily applied to the performative or body centered arts mentioned in this article, and hold the same conclusion. In general, performative disciplines do not need to be assimilated into the university to grow and develop, and if they are present on a university campus, their place is the School of Arts, not a Department of Humanities. And as for the latter, does the teaching of the humanities need the performative disciplines to be able to complete its “vision of the possibilities of the human”? Well, no, neither. And while it may be insisted on that the spectrum of interests of current academic research in the humanities is so broad that it could encompass these topics as well, my main objection remains the same: at such a delicate time for university Departments of Humanities throughout the Western world, where the political, ideological and economic pressure of the general environment constantly threatens to reduce them to complete irrelevance, what is needed is first to save them, before thinking of expanding their field of study even further to the “countertextuality”. At this point, it is no longer even a question of saving the humanist values present in the teaching of the humanities, since they have completely disappeared from the university a long time ago; it is a matter, if anything, of rescuing the mere residual presence of the humanities in the academy, to see if it is possible, in better future times, to make something from them again.

But, outside of the university, there is a much broader and rewarding world for activities that enrich the spirit and knowledge, textual or not, and it is there, and not in university classrooms, where the hope for these activities lies. As I said from the beginning, it is not up to me to talk about the value of these disciplines, or what they can represent for the knowledge of the human spirit, but only to review the line of argument of this article. And, for what it's worth, that's what I've done.