

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

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This essay is a comprehensive, if exhausting, review of how the humanities have evolved over the last few centuries. There seems, however, to be an implicit contradiction in the paper. While the author rejects the idea of “turn” as a means of discussing the various changes in the humanities, he commits considerable space to discussing the “idea” of turn, and leaves the impression that “turn” has a utility in mapping the development of “humanistic knowledge.” He notes, for example, that “the concept of the humanities, in a narrower sense, can assign a degree of primacy to the concept of turn—and it really does.”

The breadth of discussion in this essay is impressive as is the writer’s familiarity with the relevant scholarship. At times, though, the density of his discussion stands in the way of the reader’s understanding. Constant references to the work of other writers, while impressive, seem to exist in and for themselves, and at times get in the way of the paper’s argument. The author seems to recognize this when he notes how “an exhaustive presentation of countertextual peripeteias” is beyond the “scope” of his essay. Rather he chooses to focus on a “negative point of reference . . . textualism,” and how it inhibits orality and its focus on “memory, history, tradition and myth.” He uses this as an introduction to the notion of “countertextuality” and how the humanities are rooted in “texts.”

This is all valuable discussion even if it goes over well-trodden territory discussed at length by others. The real meat of the essay comes towards the end of the essay as the writer focuses on the specific challenges the humanities confront today. He is right to note how the humanities are supported by “isolated individuals” who write about the experience of others rather than their own, and that working with text stands in the way of new forms of expansion. Further, the humanities, despite an “inexhaustible wealth of literary forms of expression” limit themselves to the “scientific article, monograph, [and] review,” which inhibit other forms of humanistic experience and stand in the way of change in the university. In other words, the humanities hang on the past rather than looking to the future, and in this regard become “downright political” in how they resemble “a corporation, perhaps a supermarket, where the entirety of human reality is reduced to the cogs in a machine.”

Implicit in this discussion is the notion that the humanities are only concerned with themselves, and that humanities scholars write for one another even as they complain about the decline of humanistic studies in the university. The challenge for the humanities is to find new forms of application. Regrettably, the author does not really address how this might happen. If there is one recommendation that might be made, it is that the author expand on the second half of his paper, and not spend quite so much time focusing on a history that is generally well known. It is this second half that

constitutes the real strength of the paper and that makes an important contribution to current debate about the humanities.