

**Massimo Lollini**

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*I dedicate this volume to Paolo Bollini, in memoriam*

**Humanisms, Posthumanisms, and Neohumanisms:  
Introductory Essay<sup>1</sup>**

*Incipit*

Recent bibliography, from Michele Ciliberto (*Pensare per contrari. Disincanto e utopia nel Rinascimento*) to Paolo Rossi (*Il tempo dei maghi. Rinascimento e modernità*), upholds that Humanism and Italian Renaissance have been characterized within a too harmonic and coherent frame and that it is necessary to valorize the richness and plurality of its cultural models, if one wants humanism to be part of contemporary cultural and literary debate, addressing contemporary society's most profound cultural needs. This volume, entitled *Humanisms, Posthumanisms and Neohumanisms*, proposes a reflection articulated in different parts. Its first section, *Revisiting Early Humanism*, presents contributions engaged in rethinking early humanism, its origins and developments, from the classical tradition to Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. The second section, *Humanism in Perspective*, studies how the notion of humanism has been articulated in an historical perspective that comprises the beginning of European Colonialism in the "New World," with its epistemological paradigm shift and scientific revolution between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and then the violent historical events that took place in the twentieth century, including the Shoah. The volume's third section, *From Vico's New Science to Contemporary Neohumanisms*, introduces the notion of Neohumanisms and has Giambattista Vico's *New Science* as its departing point. Finally, the volume's last section, *A Post-humanist Philosophy and Literature?*, investigates precisely the notion of Posthuman philosophy and literature. The underlying questions addressed in different ways in all the four sections of the volume are the following: Is it still possible today to conceive of the "humanism of the word" as the driving force of humanity and human civilization in the same terms developed by early humanists? Can contemporary ethics find in humanist

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tradition an adequate inspiration to address the dramatic concerns of the present? How is it possible to read the origins and motivations of the self-proclaiming “posthumanist” wave of thinking, relying on the supposed epochal character of the technological transformations that modify under our eyes the human species? Has the time come, perhaps, for the “end of man” gloomily prophesied by Michel Foucault? Is this the fatal outcome of a model of knowledge that, fragmenting the human image in the techno-sciences, erases human existence “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* 386-87)?

### I. *Revisiting Early Humanism*

The essays of this section valorize the richness and plurality of the cultural models of early Humanism, discussing its enduring importance in contemporary philosophical and literary debates. Humanism has no fixed meaning, and as such any definition of the term will remain tied to the interpreter’s predilections. Christopher S. Celenza proposes to understand the word reaching back to its etymological roots and thereby gleaning what thinkers rooted in the textual traditions of the ancient Greco-Roman world thought about words like “human,” “humane,” and “humanity.” Celenza’s article offers an overview of the uses of those words, along with what ancient thinkers considered essential about human beings, to frame the history of “humanism” from antiquity to the modern western world. In a world in which the value of learning and culture has been de-emphasized in favor of the seemingly more predictable controlling mechanisms of natural science and technology, Celenza suggests that the classical virtues of historically informed moderation might help in returning meaningful discussion of the human to the forefront.

Moving from the ancient times to Medieval and early modern Italy, Gian Mario Anselmi identifies the core of Humanism in what he calls “la saggezza della letteratura,” or the wisdom of literature, which informs the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, and continues with Machiavelli, Guicciardini and Castiglione, providing the quintessential foundation of Italian history and identity along with its enormous influence in Europe, up to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Dante’s idea of the primacy of wisdom, nurtured by a literary and rhetorical apprenticeship and situated within an historical perspective, subverts the hierarchies of knowledge asserting the magnanimity and dignity of literary discourse and mythopoesis along with the main forms of academic knowledge from theology to philosophy, from law to medicine. Moreover, in Renaissance Humanism the ideals of *urbanitas*, *civilitas*, and *magnanimitas* include, along with the Roman *clementia*, the modern awareness of social and political conflict. In Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and Castiglione such an awareness leads in different ways to reinvent the Roman ideas of *auctoritas* and *potestas*, acknowledging the necessity of understanding

dialectically the reasons of the other, which is one of the founding themes of modern democracy as such.

Focusing on the Florentine Quattrocento — an epoch viewed by most scholars as the cradle of Humanism and the Renaissance — Stéphane Toussaint points out the necessity of a precise and rigorous definition of Humanism to avoid reducing this term to a confusing and sometimes meaningless notion. Only philosophical exactitude and historical awareness may thus restore the original and pregnant value that Marsilio Ficino and the Florentine Humanists of the Quattrocento attributed to the word *humanitas*. Their idea, based on three fundamental notions, *eruditio*, *unitas*, and *charitas*, lies at the origin of Humanism and has to be kept separated from the idea of man later developed by anthropology, which breaks the moral idea of *unitas* theorized by Ficino introducing a differentiated idea of humanity based on the natural and social sciences. Ficino's idea of *humanitas* becomes crucial if one wants to distinguish and properly assess the different types of humanisms and antihumanisms developed centuries later. Furthermore, Ficino's idea of *humanitas* may still work as an inspiring, even though partial, antidote to the claims of a so-called posthuman philosophy and to the dangers represented by the reduction of culture to commercial values.

A foremost protagonist of Quattrocento Humanism, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola is at the core of the next two essays. Pier Cesare Bori studies the importance of the interpretation of Genesis 1 developed by Pico della Mirandola in his *Discorso* (1486) and *Heptaplus* (1489). Starting from Pico, the first narrative of the creation of man became the *locus classicus* on which modern philosophical anthropology could be developed. The idea of man as representative, *qua* man, of God, played an essential role in the criticism and crisis of theocracy as the original theological-political model of all monotheisms. The modern association of “dignity” and “rights” could be enunciated, protected, and affirmed through this new reading of Genesis 1 later developed by other thinkers, from Bartolomé de Las Casas and Francisco De Vitoria to Margaret Fell and John Locke. Rossella Pescatori focuses on some kabbalistic elements of Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore* (1535) that can also be detected in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's works. Leone Ebreo's *Dialogues* contain frequent references to major Islamic philosophers, but no Christian and Italian sources are openly cited, although the second and third *Dialogues* are permeated with many implicit quotations and allusions. Besides Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio, Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola constitute unquestionably some of Leone Ebreo's main sources. Pico's works, in particular the *Commento sopra la canzone d'amore di Benivieni* (1486) and the *Heptaplus* (1489), have so many points in common with Leone's *Dialogues* that the latter seem to be a reworking of them, albeit with numerous additions. Thus the *Dialogues* should be considered from this point of view as an integration of different faiths, along the lines of what Pico tried to accomplish in his works.

In the last essay of this section, Andrea Severi emphasizes the creative and ethical dimension of Humanist philology both in the militant (Valla) and erudite (Poliziano) forms. The attention to the *verbum* (Valla's *sacramentum*) was for the humanists the crucial means of communication among human beings, the generative copula of thought and poetry able to promote the civilization of human kind and human understanding. Only by maintaining this philological attention to the word through reading the best cultural expressions of the past can the idea of humanity be preserved in the face of the authoritarian monologism of the media's political and commercial word that today feeds the phantom of the "clash of civilization."

## II. *Humanism in perspective*

This section devotes special attention to the early modern philosophers such as Leon Battista Alberti and Giordano Bruno, who, under the pressure of personal, cultural, and historical events, started pointing to the limits of the human position, a direction that distinguishes their humanism from the one developed by Florentine Neoplatonism that emphasized the infinite power of human intelligence and freedom. Also, this section of the volume studies how the question of Humanism has been articulated in crucial historical moments from the beginning of European colonialism to the Shoah, and it ends reflecting on the philosophical importance of Ernesto Grassi's "postmodern" Humanism.

Nicola Bonazzi argues that in Leon Battista Alberti one can see how the rediscovered Pliny and Plutarch recovered for the Quattrocento a fully secular dimension that opened the road to a restless naturalism contrasting Ficino's and Pico's Neoplatonism. In Alberti, Machiavelli, and Bruno the emerging anthropocentrism is put into question to the point that Alberti, following Pliny and Plutarch, could speak of man's inferiority compared to other animals. The classical tradition of Pliny and Plutarch is still vital in Bruno's *Italian Dialogues*, manifesting itself in the great kabbalistic donkey's emblem, capable of breaking the idealistic view of humanism already in decline through the re-evaluation of the ferine features of humanity. Bruno's radical critique of Neoplatonic and classical humanism is also studied by Giuseppe Mazzotta who analyzes one of the *Opere magiche*, the *Lampas Triginta Statuarum*, and one of the Italian philosophical dialogues, the *Cabala del cavallo Pegaseo*. The two dialogues, quite overtly, explore and put into play two myths that are central to Bruno's epistemology: the Pythagorean myth of the reincarnation of souls and the imagination's deceptive and secret knowledge delivered by poetry. The relationship between the two myths is studied here from the perspective of Bruno's Platonic and rhetorical speculations on memory. A new humanism emerges from these dialogues (and from this dialogue between literature and philosophy), one in which the individual remains beholden to the idea of will and power, and yet, unbeknownst to himself, remains forever caught in a process of self-invention and forgetfulness.

The world of Giordano Bruno is not the same that Florentine humanists of the Quattrocento had in mind. Bruno's world had become the infinite world of transatlantic voyages and the infinite worlds of the Copernican revolution. Claudia Alvares argues that Columbus's discovery of the New World disrupted the existing theological and legal European framework applied by Christianity to non-Christian societies. Confrontation with alterity in the Americas led to a redefinition of concepts such as "human-ness" and "civilisation," as well as to an intense problematization of the grounds on which *dominium* — that is, the right to property and self-government — could be legitimately withheld from Amerindians, unfamiliar with law and authority. The fact that the condition of slavery was minutely discussed by Iberian theologians, philosophers, and lawyers meant that, even if only for political and economic reasons, there was a certain awareness of the ethical issues at stake. Other nations did not feel subsequently compelled to justify either their bid to colonize or their reliance on slavery, indicating a gradual naturalization of the link between skin color and slave status, which was to characterize seventeenth-century racial ideology in the capitalist-driven plantation colonies.

In the debates on the humanity of the Amerindians, humanists like Sepúlveda, on the basis of Aristotelian ideas about slavery, were on the side of the driving forces of European colonialism; other voices — in particular Francisco de Vitoria and Bartolomé de Las Casas — documented by Alvares (and Bori in the first section of this volume) were on the side of the *unitas* of mankind, even though their source was not directly Marsilio Ficino's notion of *humanitas*, but rather the biblical idea of human being as *imago Dei*. A humanist critique of the ideology of colonialism and racism can be found in Giordano Bruno (Granada; Ricci; Ciliberto). This view helps understanding that in his radical critique of humanism the Nolan philosopher of the infinite worlds conceived in new terms the humanist category of *unitas*, pointing to what he considered the infinite primeval energy that generates all the animals including human beings. Abandoning the idea of a hierarchical universe Bruno created the conditions of a new philosophical idea of *unitas*, one in which all human beings without distinction may feel in harmony among themselves and all the animals in an infinite cosmos.. The new dramatic historical events of colonization and the new scientific paradigm lead the humanist of the Cinquecento to recognize and admit a new notion of *unitas* inclusive of all possible differences and otherness. The unity proposed by the Nolan erases not only the primacy of the human soul but also the possibility of ontological and anthropological differences among human beings and between human beings and animals.

Moving from the beginning of European colonialism, the next two essays address the theories and practices of humanism in two major historical tragedies of the twentieth century, Stalin's Gulag and the Shoah. Tom Dolack discusses the historical importance Francis Petrarch had for Osip Mandelstam who, in a 1923 essay called "Humanism and the Present," juxtaposes humanism with the

“wing of approaching night,” where people are viewed simply as cogs in the social machine. During the Stalinist era, Mandelstam turned to Petrarch as a representative of the humanism he adopted to oppose the Soviet system. His translations of Petrarch are an attempt to unearth and revive the values of a past tradition, and his method reflects that of the very humanist he is translating. Like the poets of the Renaissance, Mandelstam seeks to change his own culture through the imitation (or translation) of past texts, giving his source texts new life at the same time he creates his own. Peter Kuon studies the crisis of humanism after the Shoah. First he criticizes the category of the “Muselmann” as the emblematic figure of “unsayability” of the human condition in the concentration camps. The idea of a “complete witnessing” of the Shoah in Levi’s *I sommersi e i salvati* is not meant to deny the possibility of concrete witnessing but to remind us of the limits of representation. What does then remain of man’s freedom of choice in those living and working conditions that force the “best ones” to bestiality? After the Shoah and after the camps — Kuon suggests — we have to renounce the idealistic and optimistic emphasis on man’s primacy and potentiality. The survivors’ accounts may help us define not the maximal, but the minimal standards of humanity. Finally, in the last essay of this section Rocco Rubini studies Grassi’s early career, where he finds the genesis of an original “humanism” that may be defined “Postmodern.” Neither Heidegger nor Vico plays a pre-eminent role in the emergence of Grassi’s first approach to humanism. In opposition to Werner Jaeger’s *Neuhumanismus*, Grassi in his early works identifies humanism with an open-ended kind of hermeneutics (as event) in which terms and definitions are never established a priori but are always a byproduct of the philosophical dialogue of which Socratic maieutics is an exemplary instance. This emphatically nontraditional approach to Plato places Grassi in a philosophical apprenticeship common to most postmodern philosophers, from Nietzsche to Derrida (through Heidegger and Gadamer). This philosophical hermeneutics became later the foundation of Grassi’s humanistic response to Heidegger’s antihumanism.

### III. *From Vico’s New Science to Contemporary Neohumanisms*

The question and possibility of a new modern and contemporary humanism is at the core of this section. The point of departure for most of the essays included here is neither the Neuhumanismus of Werner Wilhelm Jaeger (1888-1961), nor the New Humanism of Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), but rather the *New Science* of Giambattista Vico. Pierre Girard emphasizes the impossibility of reducing Vico to the categories of historical humanism and the plurality of his sources from Lucretius’s atomism to Gassendi, and from Italian Humanism to Descartes. In this perspective Vico becomes central because he transforms the Humanist tradition suggesting new meanings and new directions. Vico’s originality consists in addressing the tension between early Humanism and modern science, a tension ignored in Cartesianism. This tension is articulated through the

complex relationships between “philology” and “philosophy” that structure the economy of Vico’s entire masterpiece, *The New Science*. Vico’s originality consists in keeping this tension open, while still conceiving the actuality of humanism, in constructing new syntheses that would allow linking two traditions usually opposed to each other. The result of this completely new philosophical experience is the definition of a new epistemology in which the two perspectives may offer a new and more complex conception of human reason, where humanism and science do not oppose each other but intertwine with one another.

Roberto Dainotto calls attention to the importance Vico’s *New Science* had in the new definition of Communism developed by Antonio Labriola. Labriola traces a new genealogy of Marxism that originates neither from Messianism nor from Positivism but precisely from Vico, who allows him to elevate communism to the status of a philosophy competing, if not identifying itself, with Idealism. Labriola declares scientific communism as nothing less than a different kind of science, which he starts calling, with a phrase borrowed from humanism, “comunismo critico.” In this way the new communism born in the afterlife of Karl Marx’s Manifesto begins to acquire the consistency of a humanistic science, whose object, rather than nature, remains human and civic society.

The importance of Vico’s *New Science* can be detected also in one of the contemporary Italian writers and artists who most eloquently spoke of a “new humanism”: Carlo Levi. Giovanna Faleschini Lerner argues that, through his multifarious and even paradoxical discussions of *umanesimo*, Carlo Levi delineates a productive middle ground between Sartre’s and Heidegger’s contrasting views of humanism. Levi’s philosophy, as it emerges in his more theoretical works, is based on a re-interpretation of Giambattista Vico’s thought and is rooted in a profound ethical concern for the other that anticipates, in many ways, Emmanuel Levinas’s “humanism of the other.” In an original re-elaboration of Vico’s category of *verum-factum*, Levi attributes to art — poetry, but also prose, painting, plastic arts, music, architecture — “l’invenzione della verità.” Levi’s discussion of the relationship of southern Italian peasantry with art is evocative of Vico’s account of the birth of poetic language. For Levi, the peasants’ forms of poetic narration correspond to the discovery of language itself. Levi’s arrival in Lucania coincides with his encounter with the peasants’ experience. From that moment on, the unreserved affirmation of the other becomes for him the condition for the existence and realization of the self. It is this ethical commitment to the other that Levi recognizes as the root of his painting and literary work.

Fundamental ethical concerns are also at the core of the most recent forms of neohumanism such as the one studied by Norma Bouchard. Within the broader scope of the present-day reassessment of the humanistic heritage outlined by Halliwell, Mously, and Said, Bouchard discusses the work of arguably the best-known spokesperson of “il pensiero meridiano”: Italian

sociologist Franco Cassano. From the framework of the global south(s) of postcolonial and subaltern theory, Cassano questions the universalizing assumptions of Eurocentric Occidentalism, while seeking to recover a subalternized archive of humanistic knowledge. Cassano's point of reference, however, is not the Humanism of the Italian Renaissance but rather the humanism that Algerian writer Albert Camus recovered in the ancient Mediterranean cultural heritage. In Camus's return to the suppressed values of this tradition, Cassano finds a model to develop a humanism for the twenty-first century: a Mediterranean neo-humanism no longer founded upon the progress of history of post-Kantian philosophy, but on the respect for human nature, the necessity of community and solidarity, the importance of an ethics of measures and limits necessary to counter present-day realities, where the very idea of *humanitas* is put into question by the infinite realms proposed by science, technology, and commercial culture.

#### IV. *A Posthumanist Philosophy and Literature?*

The last section of this volume develops an inquiry into those philosophical and literary ideas that in different ways try to abandon anthropocentrism and go beyond human-centered notions of subjectivity. Claudia Baracchi focuses on human self-understanding as it arises from the experience of nature — i.e., the experience of a relatedness to nature that is at once a belonging in nature. At stake, then, is not a conceptual approach to the question of nature, but rather the phenomenon of the emergence of the human within the embrace of what presents itself as an abysmal and irreducible mystery. The experience of nature “hiding itself” (as Heraclitus said) may give rise to the longing for mastery (of which the rationalistic-scientific project is exemplary) as well as to a celebration of the mystery in its wonder and beauty. The juxtaposition of Giordano Bruno's cosmological vision and Renaissance painting (in particular Tiziano Vecellio, but also Raphael and Leonardo) illuminates this latter perspective, disclosing mystery not so much as that which would lie beyond appearances in a world of pure contemplation but as that which inhabits appearances and actions and in them becomes manifest as mystery. The unity of contemplative life and action is further discussed by reference to authors ranging from Aristotle to Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty.

Other essays in this section discuss the meaning and value of so-called “posthumanism” in present literary and philosophical debates in a world in which molecular biology and cognitive sciences exalted the role of techno-sciences, putting into crisis the dualism nature-culture as a way to comprehend what we consider human. Nowadays it does not appear possible anymore to think of a scientific and philosophic anthropology without coming to terms with the biological dimension of the human as profoundly modified in its essential aspects, from the moment of birth to living one's own body and dying (Hayles, Marchesini, Longo). To what extent then does posthumanism depart from the



fundamental idea of *humanitas* and to what extent is it still inscribed within the tradition of humanism? For Massimo Riva the issue of the “post-human” with which we are beginning to cope makes it necessary to rethink the concept of “human dignity” according to a broader perspective that pays attention to the findings of contemporary scientific thought. This perspective implies a critical revision and rethinking of some fundamental premises of the humanistic tradition. Riva’s essay contributes to such a revision, focusing on one of the pivotal concepts of the humanistic tradition: the constitutive incompleteness or indeterminacy of the human being and the human species, as formulated by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in a theological sense and by Giambattista Vico in a historical-cultural sense.

Davide Bellini discusses the possibility of conceiving Alberto Savinio in post-humanist terms by examining a range of key questions present in his critical and artistic works: the criticism concerning some components of historical humanism, the metaphorical opposition circle/square (considered at the junction of literary and pictorial), the bourgeois reduction of demiurgic spirit, the human-animal hybridization, and the reflection on the very possibility of the posthuman and of overcoming the human element.

The last three essays of this section address the question of the posthuman from the point of view of the body. All together, they reveal a definite direction in posthuman discourses toward a philosophy and literature of radical immanence. This trend was already at the core of Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1991), the most relevant posthuman manifesto, an “ironic dream,” and an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism. The “cyborg” in that manifesto was defined as a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Angela D’Ottavio’s essay provides a socio-semiotic reading of the ways in which the posthuman acquires meaning within the imagery of contemporary technological culture, and appears through some figures of corporeality and subjectivity that inhabit the margins of the idea of “human” itself, namely, the grotesque body and the gendered body. Roberta Tabanelli studies in the works of Simona Vinci the idea of the contamination between flesh and technology as well as the performative act of self-mutilation developed in posthuman art and literature. She detects in these extreme gestures on the human body the will of a conscious re-creation of human and sexual identity. Finally, Jamie Richards analyzes the twenty-first-century novel *Meduse* by Giancarlo Pastore as a work that radically calls into question human subjectivity and its relationship to human nature, the animal, and God. This novel deals with the lack of fixed nature and human transformation in a world no longer inhabited by any possibility of *transcendence* and in which the human subject is not self-determining but weak, at the mercy of external forces.

*Explicit*

The main issue at the center of this volume is the ethical question concerning the nature of humanism in its multifaceted expressions. All the essays insist on the problematic and complex reality of humanism, pointing to the emergence of a noble idea of *humanitas* from the Greek *paideia* to the Roman *philatrophia*, from Dante's, Petrarch's, and Boccaccio's "wisdom of literature" to the Quattrocento Humanist revolution based on the ideas of *eruditio*, *charitas*, and *unitas*. The idea of the "dignity" of humankind in the works of Ficino and Pico becomes a moral idea that embraces every human being. This universal idea of *humanitas* and dignity is put into question by historical tragedies that range from European colonialism to the Shoah and the pervasive and ongoing consequences of the scientific and technological revolution. Humanism cannot be considered responsible for those tragedies, even though some contemporary humanists took the side of a racialized colonialism. On the contrary, the noble idea of *humanitas* developed by the early Humanists of the Trecento and Quattrocento re-emerges in those tragedies as a resisting force called upon to contrast with the destructive drives of violent ideologies and political and economic powers.

The idea of *humanitas* is related to the idea of the dignity of man but is also compatible with the idea of the misery of humankind, which can be found in Humanists such as Leon Battista Alberti in the Quattrocento and Machiavelli and Bruno in the Cinquecento. The idea of *humanitas* that persists in Vico's *New Science* includes both the dignity and the misery of human beings and is more and more negotiated with the pervasive and conditioning nature of modern science and technology. In this perspective Vico's thought becomes an inspiring factor of many modern and contemporary neohumanisms.

In our globalized and multicultural world, human culture is more and more conditioned by the driving forces of economy, science, and technology to the point that the very idea of *humanitas* is put into question along with the idea of an education based in the humanities. There are no easy solutions to this haunting situation, our volume does not intend to suggest the contrary but that something can be done and that we need to address it. Finally, I would like to recall in closing the experience of La bottega dell'elefante inspired by Paolo Bollini — a group of citizen in Bologna that promotes public reading and dialogue based on texts as a civic and democratic ethos — as a contemporary and powerful example of the enduring idea of *humanitas* in our time. Nevertheless, the questions that opened this volume remain open with all their disquieting effect emphasized by the perspective of the posthuman future described in the concluding essays. We need to become aware of this perspective if we want to consider all the complexity and urgency of the question of humanism nowadays.

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