The Making of the Humanities

Volume III: 
The Modern Humanities

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Introduction

The Making of the Modern Humanities

Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn

With this third volume of our three-part project on the history of the humanities we have arrived at the modern age. This is the period of discipline formation and academic institutionalization, but it is also the period when the humanities and sciences drew farther apart. While already foreshadowed by Giambattista Vico’s famous eighteenth-century distinction between the ‘science of the human’ and ‘science of the natural’, Wilhelm Dilthey’s distinction between Geisteswissenschaft and Naturwissenschaft was very influential.¹ That is, the humanities are deemed to be predicated on understanding (Verstehen), the sciences on explaining (Erklären). The distinction was adopted by philosophers such as Heinrich Rickert, Ernst Cassirer, Hans-Georg Gadamer and it was echoed in C.P. Snow’s famous Two Cultures debate.² Although actual practice in the humanities and sciences was quite different from the simple dichotomy between understanding and explaining (see the chapters in this book), the distinction molded the minds of many, and Dilthey’s interpretative approach contributed to the current image problem of the humanities. That is, the humanities are no longer seen as the pinnacle of intellectual development but as a luxury pastime with little relevance for society and even less for economy.

While this image problem has been analyzed and rebutted by many,³ it is often forgotten that the very distinction between the humanities and the natural sciences is a relatively recent one, and that practices in the sciences and the humanities point at a continuum rather than at a divide between the interpretative and the analytical, and between the subjective and the objective.⁴ More than that, with the current advent of the digital humanities – to which five chapters of this book are devoted – the two fields seem to have come together again in the twenty-first century. Between these two boundary periods – the early nineteenth and the early twenty-first century – there is an immensity of both empirical and interpretative humanistic activities: from art history to linguistics, from musicology to historiography, from philology to archeology, from theater studies to media studies, and
from literary studies to philosophy. These disciplines deserve an in-depth historical investigation in all respects, especially from a comparative perspective. This is what this book aims to contribute to.

**The history of the humanities comes of age**

The current volume is the outcome of the third conference on the history of the humanities, ‘The Making of the Humanities III’, held in Rome in 2012. It is also the third volume in the series ‘The Making of the Humanities’, which follows a chronological order from the *studia humanitatis* in the early modern period, through the birth of the *Geisteswissenschaften* in the early nineteenth century, to the modern humanities in the current era. Thus the first biannual conference on the history of the humanities, held in 2008, dealt with the early modern period (1400-1750). Proceedings were published in *The Making of the Humanities, Vol. I: Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam University Press, 2010). The second conference, held in 2010, focused on the transition of the humanistic disciplines from the early modern period to the modern era, which resulted in the book *The Making of the Humanities, Vol. II: From Early Modern to Modern Disciplines* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

The theme of the third conference was thus a natural continuation of the previous two conferences. But this conference was also different from its predecessors: it included for the first time sessions devoted to the humanities in society and to the relation between the humanities and the social sciences. During the last few years the comparative history of the humanities has proved to be a gold-mine: while the history of ‘knowledge-making disciplines’ usually tends to focus on the history of science, technology, and medicine, it has become increasingly clear how different disciplines in the humanities have set the standard in teaching and research for the social and natural sciences – such can be learned from the contributions of our keynote speakers: Lorraine Daston, John E. Joseph, Glenn Most, John Pickstone, and Jo Tollebeek. Moreover, it has turned out that the humanities had a much more intensive and continuous interaction with the sciences than was previously assumed. If there is any common thread emerging from the chapters of this book, it is the insight that the history of the humanities is not only important as a field of its own, but that it constitutes the missing link in the history of science, or even in the history of knowledge.

There are many other common threads: the historical turn in the early nineteenth century that affected all of the humanities, the search for proper methodologies in the later nineteenth century leading to separate disciplines, the universalist ambitions in the humanities in the early twentieth century (to write
encompassing overviews of world history, world literature, world art), the postmodern turn in the second half of the twentieth century, and, of course, the turn to the digital in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The 2012 conference was also different from the previous ones in that it was the first one with parallel sessions. Still, the organizers had to reject almost 70% of the submissions. From the 167 submitted abstracts, only 50 could be accepted. On the one hand the large number of submissions is a sign that the field is coming of age. On the other hand, it also means that the intimate atmosphere of the previous conferences may not be maintained in the future, as the conference is likely to continue to grow.

This will probably be the last edited volume on ‘The Making of the Humanities’, not because we have arrived at the contemporary era, but because the number of papers is becoming too large to be published in a single edited volume. In sending out all individual papers for review, we are in practice moving toward a journal-like style of publication. For the future, we believe the field will need its own journal where publication is not limited to conference attendees only. In the current time of hardship for scholarship in the humanities, we believe that bringing together all humanities disciplines in one journal will strengthen the position and visibility of the humanities around the globe.

The papers in this book

Part I dives into the relation between the humanities and sciences. Lorraine Daston argues that the humanities and the sciences – although often framed in terms of oppositions – have intertwined histories at the levels of methods, institutions, ideas and epistemic virtues. She discusses the shared epistemic virtue of objectivity which was preceded by the more ancient epistemic virtue of impartiality. Both virtues have a history, and Daston shows that the notion of historical objectivity became the model for the later scientific objectivity. H. Floris Cohen questions the present-day near-consensus that the modern distinction between the humanities and the sciences was foreign to scholars in the period of the Scientific Revolution. May not such a distinction be found back underneath the surface of at least some of their work? To find out in preliminary fashion, he briefly investigates four select cases: Pascal appears to maintain precisely such a distinction; Descartes appears to posit it in the case of musical theory; Kepler’s and Newton’s work on biblical chronology turns out to be subtly yet importantly different from their better known work in what we now call the sciences. Laura Meneghello discusses the interaction between the humanities and the natural sciences in the second half of the nineteenth century by analyzing the attitude of scientific materialism – generally considered as one of the most radical movements within positiv-
ism. By concentrating on the work of Jacob Moleschott (1822-1893), Meneghello argues that scientific materialism was particularly inclusive with respect to the humanities, resulting in an all-encompassing worldview that expanded its limits beyond the sheer divulgation of empirical research. In the last chapter of Part I, Virginia Richter gives a case study of Philip Henry Gosse’s (1810-1888) *Omphalos* (1857). She shows how Gosse used rhetorical strategies borrowed from the humanities to make what was for him a scientific argument: just as God had created Adam with a navel, he had created the earth with fossils and all, thus giving the impression not only of the earth’s great age but of the mutability of species. Richter argues that Gosse’s *Omphalos* shows the importance of ‘nonknowledge’ or ‘false knowledge’ in the formation of scholarly and scientific inquiry.

Part II addresses a number of issues pertaining to the study of language. John E. Joseph analyzes three critical moments in the emergence of modern linguistics: the demise of the concept of the ‘genius of a language’ in the nineteenth century, the role of sign theory in Saussure’s work, and the development of Meillet’s work, which resulted in a narrative about mental evolution. Applying a framework proposed by Bruno Latour, Joseph uses these three cases to show that linguistics has never been thoroughly modern, but has always had recourse to various sorts of enchantment in order to establish itself as a science. Michiel Leezenberg investigates the link between nationalism and Orientalism in a paper about the notorious Japhetic theory of Nikolai Marr (1865-1934), which played a prominent part in Soviet linguistics in the first half of the twentieth century. Leezenberg argues that, as the case of Marr’s theory shows, the creation of non-Western nationalist theories should not be viewed solely in terms of the colonial exportation of German historical-comparative philology; instead, ‘subaltern’ forms of knowledge, rooted in local agency, deserve to be explored. László Marácz investigates the context in which the grand project of producing an explanatory, comparative, and etymological dictionary of the Hungarian language took shape in the nineteenth century. Nationalist ambitions were central, as well as Romantic views. In carrying out the work, Gergely Czuczor (1800-1866) and János Fogarasi (1801-1878) relied on both foreign and local traditions. Although the dictionary was discredited for its alleged outdated approach soon after it was completed, Marácz argues that the dictionary has great merits, and can be used for linguistic research today.

Part III deals with the history of history writing in the modern age. Jo Tollebeek sets the stage by showing that in the decades around 1900, the humanities went through a process of professionalization and academization. In contrast to the natural sciences, however, historians and their colleagues continued to teach in ‘lecture rooms’ in their private homes. Tollebeek argues that this homely scientific culture strongly contributed to the social, epistemological, and ethical content of the humanities. Marita Mathijsen shows how after the French Revolution
the writing of history fell into the hands of practitioners of three new kinds: editors, literary authors, and professional historians. New, rigorous standards for authenticity come up, but also popularization in the sense that the past is now opened up to everyone. These two coexisting movements of professionalization and of ‘democratization’ become particularly manifest as literary authors turn themselves into history writers, all the while historians begin to employ literary techniques. Christine Ottner discusses the influence of scholarly periodicals in the process of academic professionalization and institutionalization. She examines three scholarly journals from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century showing that these not only reflect developments within disciplines, but also actively influence these developments by way of an editorial policy. As part of the making of the historical discipline scholarly periodicals turn out to be very complex elements. Herman Paul examines the impact of ideals of scholarly virtue (such as objectivity, honesty, carefulness) on the development of humanities disciplines. By a study of methodology manuals from history, art history and music history, he argues that these manuals were not merely textbooks on historical criticism, but attempts to codify a certain vision of the historian’s scholarly vocation, described in terms of goods to be achieved and to be avoided. Finally, Bart Karstens discusses the history of the history of science. He tries to explain the unstable position of the history of science within the current academic system. Karstens argues that this is due to the tight relation of the history of science to both philosophy of science and the natural sciences themselves. Although alternative models from sociology and anthropology have been used to study science, according to Karstens the study of past science is in a confused state marked by lack of coherence, theoretical anarchy, and uneven attention to the natural sciences and the humanities.

Part IV is devoted to the intertwined traditions of philology and classical scholarship, highlighting how the study of antiquity via its written remnants has informed the systematic analysis of texts in the humanities up to the early twentieth century; it remains relevant today. Glenn W. Most explains how Quellenforschung used to be the basis of explorations of the Greco-Roman world a century ago, whereas nowadays it is practiced by relatively few scholars. By the mid-nineteenth century, Friedrich August Wolf’s (1759-1824) philological method was applied to Greek poetry and its extension to philosophy, historiography, and Roman copies of Greek sculptures was the logical next step. Many of the findings of Quellenforschung therefore continue to provide an apparently solid foundation for studies in a variety of disciplines within classical scholarship and beyond, such as historical theology. Eline Scheerlinck addresses the emancipation of the history of religions from its basis in philology and theology. She focuses on the Belgian classicist Franz Cumont (1868-1947), the first to study a specific re-
ligion (Mithraicism) from the viewpoint of Altertumswissenschaft as a whole, including epigraphical and archeological approaches. He assigned to the Near East a seminal role in the moral and religious evolution of the Roman Empire. Annette M. Baertschi explores how large-scale research projects, launched by the Prussian Academy in the late nineteenth century, made literary and material sources accessible and engendered new forms of organization and collaboration that also impacted the natural sciences: classics, in particular, evolved into an authoritative discipline with subdivisions such as Greek and Latin philology, archeology, ancient history, epigraphy, and papyrology. This development may prove to be analogous to today’s ‘big data’ projects in digital humanities. Jacqueline Klooster points out that Lachmann’s philological ideal, aimed at distinguishing the single authoritative version of a text, has been questioned in recent years in reference to medieval textual transmission. She investigates the evidence for ancient variant readings and especially their evaluation by ancient Greek scholars in order to plead for a historically accurate dismissal of the search for the authoritative source. The chapter ties ancient editorial practices and textual transmission to New Philology’s observations concerning the status of textual variants. Floris Solleveld, by contrast, focuses on different types of intertextuality to arrive at a new way of analyzing developments in scholarly method in the humanities. He argues that changing patterns of intertextuality (such as editing, extension, compilation, reference, and citation) are revelatory of changing styles of reasoning. Studying practical and conceptual shifts through types of intertextuality therefore opens a new perspective on the relation between scholarly ideals and practices.

Part V, devoted to twentieth-century literature and drama, highlights fundamentally interdisciplinary and transnational approaches. Ingrid D. Rowland foregrounds the versatile historian of literature and religion Furio Jesi (1941-1980), zooming in on his Cultura di Destra (1979) and its political ideology that harked back to colorful thinkers such as Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) and Julius Evola (1898-1974). Jesi’s book comments on the Enlightenment and more recent Fascist past, while also testifying to the author’s own role in the politicized Italian ‘Years of Lead’. It remains relevant to present-day Italian novelists. Ton van Kalmthout addresses the attempt to write comprehensive histories of ‘world literature’. He explores the development of this historiographical genre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, identifying two contrary trends: academization and popularization. The chapter focuses on examples by scholars from the Netherlands, singling out Jan Walch (1879-1946), former professor at the Sorbonne and director of Amsterdam’s Theater School. Chiara Maria Buglioni outlines the unique struggle of German theater studies, growing away from literary and historical studies, as well as from ethnology, in the years before the Second World War. Its founders, Max Herrmann (1865-1942) and Artur Kutscher (1878-1960),
Herrmann pointed out the relevance of archaeological investigation while Kutscher focused on literary drama and its irrational elements. Many of their problems are still relevant for theater as a multimedial object of inquiry.

Part VI is devoted to the history of art and archeology, focusing on the period around 1900 when new conceptual clarity and disciplinary ambitions arose. Birgit Mersmann associates the making of art history as a universal discipline, based on the understanding of mutual cultural influences and historical transfers, with the German historian Karl Lamprecht (1856-1915). In his wake, texts by Alois Riegl (1898), Oskar Beyer (1923), and Aby Warburg (1923) reached out to disciplines such as universal history and cultural history, which resulted in a reconceptualization of art history’s objects, methodology, and geographical framing. This approach adumbrates the current ideal of ‘world art studies.’ Adi Efal focuses on a specific art-historical concept and its wider application in the humanities: the term ‘genre.’ Following the scholarship of the Vienna School around 1900, this classification term was superseded by the concept of style as one of the central tools of historicism in the history of art. The chapter argues that genre, as pertaining to the vocabulary of literary history since Aristotle’s *Poetics*, is inherently related to subject matter. The concept of genre furthermore helps to focus historical and analytical attention on an artwork’s generation and its diachronic nature. José María Lanzarote-Guiral reveals how the polemic following the discovery of the prehistoric paintings in Altamira (in northern Spain) in 1878 sparked the rise of a discipline. This involved the cross-pollination of the different epistemological traditions of natural science, archeology, and especially anthropology, when Henri Breuil (1877-1961) and Hugo Obermaier (1877-1946) recognized the cave’s authenticity in 1902. The revolutionary insight that ‘primitive’ men possessed sophisticated symbolic capacities resulted from scholarly exchange across European borders.

Part VII discusses the various attempts of musicologists to incorporate insights from other disciplines, ranging from the natural sciences and psychology to art history. Maria Semi points out how before the birth of the cognitive sciences, natural philosophy had already furnished aesthetics with fundamental notions. She zooms in on *Zoonomia* (1794-1796), a study of the laws of organic life by Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), which contained an attempt to define the pleasure received from music in relation to time, repetition, and a melodious succession of notes. A new comprehension of the mind and the body engendered a new way of thinking about the human reaction to art. Riccardo Martinelli begins with the late nineteenth century when comparative musicology became an institutional science. Carl Stumpf (1848-1936), founder of the Phonogramm-Archiv (1906) of non-Western music, developed an empirically oriented investigation of the per-
ception of sounds. Physiological studies on the sense of touch suggested that two sensations of tone at the same moment tend to mix, which explained the experience of musical consonance. In Stumpf’s wake, Erich Hornbostel (1877-1935) focused attention on the eventual ‘melting’ of Western and non-Western cultures. Alexis Ruccius outlines the history of music iconography as an example of the successful transfer of methods from one discipline to another. In the late nineteenth century, this approach focused merely on reconstructing musical instruments and performance with the aid of images. Only in the 1920s the Warburg School of art history inquired after the relation between sound and image as an element of the history of ideas, which culminated in Leo Schrade’s (1903-1964) analysis of Cluny Abbey.

Part VIII addresses how Western humanities were introduced in Asia and how the confrontation with Asian culture and scholarship affected the humanities in the West. Steffi Marung and Katja Naumann explore how Oriental studies were established in late-nineteenth-century Europe as a transnational endeavor. Around 1900 Russian Oriental studies were internationally in the vanguard. The Petersburg Faculty of Oriental Studies (1855), which included East Asians as scholars, was initially a mainstay for German, French, and English Orientalists. After the 1917 Revolution several leading scholars left the country; some migrating to the US, where the discipline flourished due to the resulting transatlantic networks as exemplified by Serge Elisséeff (1889-1975), who studied in Japan and migrated to Paris before coming to Harvard in 1931. Julia Orell explores how the consolidation of the historical disciplines in Germany engendered the establishment of East Asian art history. The writings of Karl With (1891-1980) on Japanese and Chinese art from the 1920s reveal some of the methodological issues arising with this new field. His rejection of the Greek-influenced Gandhara sculptures exemplifies how he recognized independent local developments, positing Asia as a counterpart to Europe. At the same time, With associated these developments with the avant-garde art of his own time. Perry Johansson focuses on early-twentieth-century China as hunting ground for a slew of Western archeological expeditions, marked by the difficult interaction between European scholarship and Chinese politics. He points out how a reaction against foreign attempts to rewrite the Middle Kingdom’s history brought about a politics of heritage and history with modern methods. This laid the basis for a reinvention of Chinese tradition that remains relevant today.

Part IX goes into the history of information science and digital humanities well into the twenty-first century. The first contribution by Charles van den Heuvel traces the origins of these disciplines and describes how at the beginning of the computer era, scholars were persuaded to follow the rigorous, often exclusive methods of the natural sciences. Only recently have e-humanities researchers
plied for the development of holistic methodologies standing in a hermeneutic tradition. Van den Heuvel shows how recent ICT developments also try to incorporate the complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty of humanities data, methods, and practices leading to a new phase in the making of the humanities, described as Humanities 3.0. Johanna Sprodel examines the history of the concept of concordance. A concordance shows in how many texts any word (or subject) occurs; it may be used to find specific passages, compare different usages, to evaluate relations between words and terms, etc. Sprodel argues that concordance as a genuine concept of the humanities finds its application in Google and other search engines, and that by analyzing these based upon the idea of concordances we can become aware of the changing methods and impacts of the digital. Jan Rock goes into one of the earliest card-file databases on medieval Dutch texts, the Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta (BNM), set up around 1900 by the Belgian philologist Willem De Vreese (1869-1938) at Ghent. The BNM led to a shift from a materialist approach toward the use of data systems in philology (and nationalistic and scientistic narratives) in the Low Countries and abroad. It contributed to central data systems in philology throughout the twentieth century. Stef Scagliola and Franciska de Jong describe the historiographical development of oral history. After a long period of negligence, oral accounts reemerged as ‘reliable’ historical sources with the invention of the tape recorder. Affordable technology facilitated the creation of collections around a theme or social group, and in this way supported oral history’s ideological agenda of giving voice to the less powerful. Scagliola and De Jong argue that given the multilayered content of audio(visual) oral history accounts, the application of present-day digital tools for searching content and detecting patterns, holds the promise of rich data for multiple disciplines. The final paper by Jan-Willem Romeijn discusses some methodological issues related to the fast growth of empirical and computational methods in the humanities. He argues that confirmation theory – a subdiscipline of philosophy of science – provides useful models for critically evaluating these methods, as it provides a handle on the new notions of evidence that humanities disciplines will need to accommodate. He argues that confirmation theory might thereby help to establish a smoother connection of the humanities with the sciences.

Part X contains two papers discussing the relationship between the humanities and philosophy, each focusing on a specific circle of philosophers. Carlo Ierna explores the idea of philosophy as science in the philosophy of Franz Brentano (1838-1917) and his school. Brentano claimed that the true method of philosophy is none other than that of the natural sciences and claimed a specific field of enquiry for philosophy: mental phenomena defined as phenomena that contain an object intentionally, which are distinct from natural phenomena. This view of philosophy was meant to provide a scientific foundation for the humanities
independent of the natural sciences, and proved to be a successful research paradigm itself. David L. Marshall revisits the Weimar origins of political theory, and observes hitherto neglected links between Heidegger’s ‘Dasein’, Arendt’s ‘The Human Condition’, Warburg’s ‘Denkraum’ and Benjamin’s interest in various sorts of actualization-caught-in-the-midst-of-possibility. Marshall thus reveals a rhetorical core of what could be a rich humanities interdiscipline, in which philosophy, political theory, art history, and literary criticism might all contribute to the analysis of human being as a series of actualizations constituted by possibility.

Part XI is concerned with topics at the interface between the humanities and the social sciences. Jeroen Bouterse discusses the views of Max Weber on how explanation in the humanities differs from that in the natural sciences. Whereas Weber’s predecessors Windelband and Rickert tried to safeguard the humanities against the rising scientific psychology by claiming a unique mode of understanding for them, Weber rejected such an approach, arguing that explanation in the humanities should be just as rigorously empirical and objective as in any science, but that it still differed in that its object, human action, is goal-directed and -oriented on values. Robert Deam Tobin reviews the history of the study of sexuality, focusing on the role attributed to evidence from literary sources in theories of sexual identities. Tobin shows that early defenders of male-male love in the 1830s relied primarily on literary sources, whereas later in the century both emancipationists and sexologists appealed to natural science. In the early twentieth century, a group of theorists reverted to literature, defending a view of sexuality as fluid and universal, as opposed to the immutable sexual identities supposed by earlier theorists. Marinus Ossewaarde sketches the various imageries that have been instrumental in the shaping of sociology as a discipline. Asserting that in Comtean sociology technomorphic thought patterns were predominant, while with Tocqueville sociomorphic imageries prevailed, Ossewaarde next surveys the history of the field throughout the twentieth century and discusses the changing imageries reflecting the dominant branch of science in a certain period, from nuclear physics to neo-Darwinian biology, which served sometimes as a model, and currently primarily as the object of antagonism for sociologists. Bram Kempers likewise sketches a broad view on the history of sociology, but from the perspective of the great diversity of approaches, rival systems of classification, and ambiguous relations with other social sciences and with the humanities that have characterized the discipline from the beginning. Kempers then traces the development of sociology from Comte and Durkheim, through the interdisciplinary work of Huizinga and the redefinition of the field by Weber and Elias to the present, in which the arts continue to inspire and inform the endeavor to understand the human condition. Rather than to diversity of views, Abram de Swaan draws attention to a consensus in the human sciences – a rare phenomenon. It concerns
the near unanimous conviction among scholars that the perpetrators of genocide are not distinguishable from other human beings in terms of personality traits. The Eichmann trial in 1961 and the Milgram punishment experiment are typically used in support of the belief that it is the immediate situation, not a certain disposition, that turns people into mass killers. The arguments for this belief are analyzed by De Swaan, and dismantled.

Part XII deals with the position of the humanities in society at large. Vincent Gengnagel and Julian Hamann describe the constant struggle for autonomy that the humanities have been engaged in from the nineteenth century on. Discussing two case studies that exemplify the balancing acts between autonomy and societal as well as academic relevance, they show from a sociological perspective, first, how German historians between 1871 and 1945 managed to maintain their own research logic while being politically engaged, and second, that the extensive reforms and the rise of the social sciences in the period after 1945 did not compromise the historians’ claim for autonomy. Paul Jay investigates the role that post-structuralist literary, critical, and cultural theory has played in the humanities from 1968 onward, arguing that it would be a mistake to maintain that this type of theory has undermined and marginalized the humanities. On the contrary, it embodies a critical attitude that has always been central to the humanities, and that should be valued and used as an essential part of the mission of the humanities, which is to teach a range of skills in critical thinking.

The volume ends with an Epilogue by John V. Pickstone in which he makes a plea for bringing the histories of the knowledge-making disciplines together – humanities, sciences, medicine, and technology. He shows how the approach put forward in his book Ways of Knowing (2000) can include the humanities, in particular in describing knowledge practices and knowledge revolutions. Drawing from examples from language, history, and philology, Pickstone argues that the common image of humanities disciplines as following the natural sciences is misleading. Instead he argues for a historical frame to include all knowledge-making disciplines.

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Notes


