

Where do we go from here?

The Making of the Humanities V conference report
by Floris Solleveld

Has the history of the humanities become a discipline? Eight years ago the first *The Making of the Humanities* conference was organized, and since then a lot has happened. Monographs by Rens Bod and James Turner containing an overview of the history of the humanities have appeared. Four more *Making of Humanities* conferences have been organized and proceedings of the first three conferences have been published. Last year the Society for the History of Humanities was founded, the first issue of the journal *History of Humanities* was launched. Institutionally, this is tantamount to what it takes to establish a new field of studies. With its fifth instalment, hosted by Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, *The Making of the Humanities* is becoming a yearly event, and with new conferences coming up in Oxford 2017 and Beijing 2018, it is going global.

With growth and expansion comes the inevitable question of direction. The first three conferences mapped the historical genesis of the humanities in the West from the Renaissance to the Modern Age. Without such a clear time frame and geographical focus one of the main questions at the Baltimore conference was how to define the field more broadly. For example, several sessions and a keynote lecture were devoted to global comparisons, mainly between Western Europe and China, pursuing question such as: does the term humanities make sense in a non-Western, or medieval context? Is there a history of 'the' humanities, and what is part of it?

Sarah Kay posed a first challenge in her keynote lecture on "Inhuman Humanities and the *Artes* that make up Medieval Song", with which the conference was opened. Drawing upon medieval songbooks and especially upon a puzzling diagram from a Reims manuscript, she reconstructed constellations of medieval knowledge, in which modern distinctions of mind and nature, human and inhuman do not apply. Kay vividly demonstrated how the medieval science of music could be the music of the celestial spheres on one page and the key to lyrical bestiaries on the other, with the nine muses dancing through the diagram blown forth by the four winds. As a way of studying music and poetry, these constellations belong to the history of the humanities broadly conceived, and yet they are not merely different from modern categories but also incommensurable with the notion of 'the humanities' as a distinct field.

Another challenge is the way in which digital techniques are changing the study of the humanities. 'Digital humanities' now apparently is well-established enough to have a session devoted to its own history. The session highlighted that this history is troubled by both exponential expansion and the unexpectedly swift deterioration of digital record. Microfilm, once the information technology of the future, is already becoming the 20th century's cuneiform. In another session, Cynthia Pyle invited heated response by declaring the New York Public Library dead, now that it was shifting its attention away from books and towards digitization. Several participants averred that the two can very well go together.

In a roundtable session on "The Classics of the Humanities", Rens Bod, Kasper Eskildsen, and Kevin Chang presented plans for a global anthology of key texts from the history of the humanities. It would have to contain some forty texts (mainly excerpts) with introduction, from antiquity to the present and from several parts of the world. Most participants in the session agreed on the utility of such a project, yet getting a canon 'right' is no easy matter, perhaps even an impossible task. Thus in the list presented only two medieval texts were selected, and all non-Western texts were from the

pre-modern age. Clearly the editors of such an anthology need to offer a satisfactory explanation of their selection criteria. A problem might be the supposed unity of 'the' humanities. While to write a roughly linear history of an individual discipline seems to be a feasible project, for a cluster of disciplines, such as 'the humanities', this is far more complicated, because there have been all kinds of parallel and intersecting developments, disciplinary splits and dead programmes. That is what makes the history of the humanities as a whole interesting, and what it adds to the history of its constituent disciplines. Yet, a global history of the humanities adds a whole new dimension of parallel developments and intersections, following different chronologies, and is riddled with cultural translation problems. Taking into account all these dimensions of complexity seems to require not one, but several histories of the humanities, written from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives.

The Making of the Humanities V offered a rich variety of such histories. There were sessions on post-war anthropology, learning and public opinion, and the historiography of science and medicine along with more conventional themes on the history of art history, philology, history writing, and literary studies. In the 3rd keynote lecture Anthony Grafton, with usual Graftonian fervor, took up a passage in James Turner's recent *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Humanities* about early modern ecclesiastical history to reveal the hectic world behind it, in which Protestant and Catholic scholars formed networks and research groups to fight each other to the death with excerpts, manuscripts, collations and compilations. Katharina Schmidt carried the graduate student award with a paper on comparative legal history that covered several centuries, conveying a tragic story of how historical professionalization narrowed itself down.

Finally, a good part of the conference was devoted to historiographical issues and self-reflection. Thus there were sessions on the epistemology of the humanities, what historiography and philosophy can learn from each other, and the comparative approach to the past. Bart Karstens asked to what extent the Kuhnian notion of 'paradigms' is applicable to the history of linguistics; Mario Wimmer suggested that the deep-rooted Protestantism behind Ranke's historiography also influenced his notion of time, and, on a lighter note, Adriana Markantonatos described Reinhart Koselleck as an amateur caricaturist and photographer whose favourite working position was lying on a sofa, reading a book.

From *The Making of the Humanities V* we can conclude that the history of humanities is a very broad field indeed. The conference series have contributed to creating a diverse picture of the humanities, up to a point where the notion of 'the' humanities has become diffuse, perhaps rightly so. As a field, the history of the humanities therefore presents itself as an interdisciplinary platform rather than as a disciplinary matrix. The ongoing growth of *The Making of the Humanities* conference shows that such a platform was needed indeed, if only to combine forces: it does not only support cross-disciplinary comparisons and the writing of *histoires croisées*, but also makes the histories of these various fields more visible than they are within the confines of linguistics, history, literary studies, art history et al.