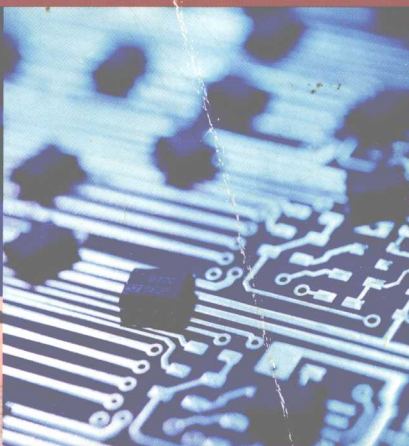


# The New Humanities Reader



Richard E. Miller | Kurt Spellmeyer

second edition

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THE  
New Humanities  
READER

Second Edition

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# PREFACE

This book probably differs from most you have encountered, at least those that you have encountered in school. Generally, the books taught in school tell students how to think, but ours has a different purpose. We wanted to put in your hands a book that would require you to make connections for yourself as you think, read, and write about the events that are likely to shape your future life.

Although the articles and essays assembled here deal with subjects as diverse as the global increase in ethnic violence and the practice of Tibetan meditation, the book is not really “about” violence or meditation or any of the other subjects explored by the readings we have selected. Instead, this book is about the need for new ways of thinking, and it does not pretend that those ways of thinking are widely practiced today. Our world has seen more change in the last hundred years than it had seen in the previous thousand. From the media we get daily reports on subjects that our great-grandparents might have found incomprehensible: breakthroughs in cloning; mergers of U.S. firms with Japanese or German partners; a global treaty on biological weapons; a new account of the universe in the first seconds after the Big Bang; the melting of the polar icecaps; legislation to extend health-care benefits to same-sex couples. Such events are truly without precedent.

Never before have people faced uncertainty in so many different areas. Will the Internet be a negative influence, contributing to the forces that have pulled apart the family unit, or will it strengthen our neighborhoods and communities? Will the global economy create widespread unemployment and environmental decline, or will it usher in an era of undreamed-of prosperity and peace? Will encounters between different cultures, long separated by geography, lead to a new renaissance, or must such meetings always end in balkanization and violence? Unlike the questions posed by the standard textbook, the answers to these questions aren’t waiting for any of us in the teacher’s edition. Not even the best educated and the most experienced among us can foresee with certainty how the life of our times will turn out. If our problems today are much more sweeping than those encountered by humankind before, they are also more complex. Globalization is not just an issue for economists, or political scientists, or historians, or anthropologists: it is an issue for all of them—and us—together. The degradation of the biosphere is not just an ecological matter, but a political, social, and cultural matter as well.

The uniqueness of our time requires that we devise new understandings

of ourselves and of the world. One purpose of this book is to provide a forum for these understandings to emerge. It may seem strange, perhaps, that we would have such lofty goals in a course for undergraduates. Surely the experts are better equipped to respond to issues of the sort our world now confronts than are beginning students in our colleges and universities. But this assumption may be unjustified. While the forms of expertise available today clearly have great value, most of the current academic disciplines were created more than a century ago, and the divisions of knowledge on which they are based reflect the needs of a very different society. It is worth remembering, for example, that in 1900 cars were a new technology, and airplanes and radios had yet to be invented. Scientists still debated the structure of the atom. The British Empire dominated three-fourths of the globe, and "culture" meant the traditions of Western Europe's elite, never more than one-tenth of one percent of the population of that region. In a certain sense, the current generation of college students, teachers, and administrators needs to reinvent the university itself, not by replacing one department or methodology with another, but by forging broad connections across areas of knowledge that still remain in relative isolation.

### **New Humanities for New Times: The Search for Coherence**

Some readers of this book will be surprised by the absence of material from the traditional humanities: poems and plays, photographs of paintings and statues, excerpts from great works of philosophy such as Plato's *Republic* and Descartes's *Discourse on Method*. Clearly, no one should leave Aristotle or Shakespeare or Toni Morrison unread. And anyone unfamiliar with Leonardo da Vinci, Frida Kahlo, Thelonious Monk, and Georgia O'Keeffe has missed a priceless opportunity. Yet this book has grown out of the belief that the humanities today must reach farther than in centuries past. Without intending to do so, traditional humanists may have contributed to the decline of their own enterprise. One could even argue that the humanities have seen their principal task as the preservation of the past rather than the creation of the future. Humanists have often left real-world activities and concerns to other fields, while devoting themselves to passive contemplation, aesthetic pleasure, and partisan critique. Consequently, most people outside the university have come to consider the humanities as something closer to entertainment, wish fulfillment, or a covert form of politics, while regarding the sciences as the only real truth.

The humanities today must be understood in a new way: not as a particular area of knowledge but as the human dimension of *all* knowledge. Engineering may lie outside the traditional humanities, but it enters the domain of the New Humanities when we begin to consider the unexpected consequences of technological innovation, as Edward Tenner does in his observa-

tions on the consequences of the automobile. When we define the humanities in this way, it may come as a surprise that some of our society's foremost humanists work in fields quite far removed from the traditional humanities. Stephen Jay Gould, one of the writers in this collection, was a distinguished paleontologist who played a leading role in American cultural life. Well-versed in Western arts and letters, he also brought to his writing the knowledge and insight of a highly accomplished scientist. Marcia Angell, a pathologist and the former editor-in-chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, has helped to safeguard our society as a whole by challenging the way that drug companies do business.

The New Humanities, as represented by this book, bring change in another way as well: they invite us to take knowledge obtained at the university beyond the confines of the university itself. In a certain sense, this means that we all must become our own best teachers: we must find in our own lives—our problems, values, dreams, and commitments—an organizing principle we will not find in a curriculum which is bound to seem disorganized. The great, unspoken secret of the university is that the curriculum has no center: specialization makes sure of that. Historians write primarily for historians; literary critics for other critics. As we shuttle back and forth between these specialized disciplines, the only coherence we gain is the coherence we have constructed for ourselves. Under these conditions, what the New Humanities can teach us is a different way of using knowledge, a way of thinking that synthesizes many different fields of study.

Specialized learning in the disciplines typically deals with the "how," but it often leaves unanswered the "why." There has never been a course called "Life 101," and given the complexity of our world, such a course seems unlikely. But something important will be missing if we leave the "why" questions unexplored. Should we continue to pursue a technological utopia? Does modern science mean the end of religion? Is social inequality an acceptable price to pay for economic growth? Any attempt to answer these questions requires specialized knowledge, yet knowledge alone is not enough. Because a cogent, well-informed case can be made on either side of almost every issue, the source of our ultimate commitments must reach deeper. We might say that the "why" questions shape these commitments because they address our most basic and most personal relations to other people and to the world. In different ways, these questions ask us how we choose to live. No expert can choose on our behalf, because no expert can live our lives for us or define what our experiences should mean to us.

The coherence missing from the curriculum is not a quality of knowledge but of our own lives. In itself, no amount of learning can produce a sense of coherence. That sense arises, instead, from a creative and synthetic activity on our part as we interact with the world. Again and again, we need to make connections between discrete areas of knowledge and between knowledge and our personal experience. This coherence is never complete because there

is always something more to learn that remains unconnected, but we might think of coherence, not as a goal reached once and for all but as an ideal worth pursuing continuously. Of course, cynicism and fragmentation are always options, too, and they require no special effort. One could easily live as though nothing and no one mattered, but in such a case, learning and living become exercises in futility. The New Humanities offer a better path.

### Knowledge in Depth and Knowledge of the World

As everyone understands, formal education has been carefully designed to keep the disciplines separate. In economics classes, we typically read economics; in history classes, we typically read history. This approach allows information to be imparted in small, efficiently managed packages. We can divide, say, biology from chemistry, and then we can divide biology into vertebrate and invertebrate, and chemistry into organic and inorganic. We start with the general and move to the particular: ideally, we learn in depth, with increasing mastery of details that become more and more refined. At the end of the semester, if everything goes well, we can distinguish between an ecosystem and a niche, a polymer and a plastic, a neo-Kantian and a neo-Hegelian. We can contrast Hawthorne's treatment of the outsider with Salinger's, or we can explain the debate about whether slavery or states' rights actually caused the Civil War.

Knowledge in depth is indispensable. But it can also create a sense of disconnection, the impression that education is an empty ritual without real-world consequences beyond the receipt of a grade and the fulfillment of a requirement. In the classroom, we learn to calculate sine and cosine without ever discovering how these calculations might be used and why they were invented. Searching for symbols in a poem or a short story becomes a mental exercise on par with doing a crossword puzzle. Instead of reflecting on why events have happened and how they get remembered and recorded, we refine our ability to recapitulate strings of dates and names. At its worst, learning in depth can produce a strange disconnect: the purpose of learning becomes learning itself, while activity in the real world becomes incidental, even difficult to imagine. As students reach the final years of high school, they may understand vaguely that they ought to know *Hamlet*, and should be able to identify *The Declaration of Independence* and explain how photosynthesis has influenced the shape of leaves, but in response to an actual tragedy, an environmental disaster, or a real-life legal crisis, they might feel unqualified to speak and unprepared to act.

College-level learning can offer an escape from this predicament by giving students greater freedom to choose what they will study, and in many cases the subjects they choose are closely related to their real-world objectives. But even with this new-found freedom, the problem of discon-

nection crops up in other ways. After years of hard work, a student who has mastered electrical engineering may still leave college poorly informed about the globalized, commercial environment in which most engineers now do their work. Students well-versed in Renaissance drama or the history of World War I may find their own lives after graduation much more difficult to explain. For some people, this problem of disconnection may arise long before graduation. One who sets out to memorize facts from, say, a social psychology textbook may find that these facts grow increasingly stale. Easily memorized one day, they are quickly forgotten the next. The risk of knowledge in depth is that we lose our sense of the larger world and we forget that a field like psychology, for all its current sophistication, began with tentative and somewhat clumsy questions about the mind. Ironically, the more we treat an area of knowledge as a reality in itself, the less we may be able to understand and use what we have supposedly learned.

There is another kind of knowledge that we begin to create when we ask ourselves how our learning pertains to the world outside the classroom. This line of questioning is more complex than it might initially seem because the larger world is never simply out there waiting for us. All knowledge begins as a knowledge of parts and fragments, even our knowledge of the private lives we know in most detail. Each of our private lives may seem complete, in itself, just as a field like psychology can seem to explain everything once we are immersed in its methods and its facts. But this sense of completeness is an illusion produced by the limits of our perspective. Beyond the reach of what we know here and now, nothing seems to matter. We begin to get a glimpse of the larger world, however, only when we shift our focus from one reality to another: only then do we discover the deficiencies in our previous ways of thinking, and only then are we able to think in new and different ways. This movement from the known to the unknown is the essence of all learning; indeed, the most successful learners are generally those who have developed the highest tolerance for not knowing—those who continue to question and explore issues beyond their own areas of specialization, entertaining alternatives that others might find unimaginable.

Knowledge itself can be defined in many ways: as a quantity of information, as technical expertise, as cultivated taste, as a special kind of self-awareness. And as varied as these definitions may appear, they share an underlying principle. Whatever the form knowledge may take, it always emerges from a process we might call *connecting*. The eighteenth-century English scientist Sir Isaac Newton, who first understood the complex relations between force, mass, and acceleration, may have been inspired by connecting his scientific work with his deeply held religious convictions about the rational perfection of God and His Creation. Many other notable thinkers likewise found inspiration through connection. Roughly two hundred years after Newton's discoveries had sparked a technological revolution, a young lawyer born in India, Mohandas K. Gandhi, drew on Henry



David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, written in support of abolitionists just before the Civil War, to launch a campaign of passive resistance against the racist government of South Africa. Two years before Gandhi spent his first term in jail as a political prisoner, a French artist and intellectual, Marcel Duchamps, shocked the art world with a painting—*Nude Descending a Staircase*—inspired by scientific photographs of athletes in motion. Whether we are talking about physics or political systems, epidemiology or aesthetics, knowledge by its very nature brings together disparate worlds of thought and action.

### Creative Reading: From Explicit to Implicit

The selections in this book are intended for creative reading. The humanities should do more than convey information or give professors a chance to demonstrate their brilliance. After all, studies have consistently demonstrated that we retain little of what we have been taught unless we put that knowledge to use. At its best, education should offer beginners the chance to practice the same activities that more accomplished thinkers engage in: beyond receiving knowledge, beginners should participate in the making of knowledge. The articles and chapters collected in this book offer many opportunities for such participation. All of the selections are challenging, some because they are long and complex, some because they draw on specialized disciplines, and some because they open up unusual perspectives. These are not readings that lend themselves to simple summaries and multiple-choice answers. Instead, they require discussion—they were written to elicit activity and response.

It is important not to think of essays such as these as truths to be committed to memory or arguments to be weighed and then accepted or rejected. It might be more useful to see them in much the same way we now see Internet sites. Every site on the Internet is linked to countless others by the connections that Web authors and programmers have forged. As a result of their cumulative efforts, one site links us to another and then to the next, on and on for as long as we care to go. In some ways, even the most useful and informative written texts are less sophisticated than the simplest Web sites, and the Internet can transform the labor of many days—sifting through periodicals and rummaging through the library stacks—into the work of a few hours. Yet the Web also has limitations that the printed word does not. The Web, after all, can show us only those pathways that someone has already made semipermanent. By contrast, *all* connections to the printed text are *virtual* connections: any text can be linked to any other text in a web of inquiry and analysis potentially much vaster than the Internet itself. When we surf the Internet, we find only what others want us to find, but the

connections we personally forge between one text and the next may truly be uncharted terrain.

Texts can be connected to other texts in any way a reader finds helpful and credible. But the ideas set forth in a text also offer a potential network of connections waiting to be made. Of course, every text has an explicit dimension: the words on the page in their most literal form and the order in which ideas are presented. Because of this explicit content, it is possible to memorize and repeat, more or less verbatim, the information that a text provides. We might try to remember, for example, all the major authors Karen Armstrong reviews in "Does God Have a Future?" Yet the meaning of a text is something more than what the words on the page explicitly state. A text becomes meaningful only through the implicit connections it motivates. To understand a text, as opposed to simply repeating it, is to move back and forth from the explicit to the implicit until an interpretation takes shape. In Armstrong's case what matters more than the particular figures she mentions is the overall direction of religious thought in the twentieth century—a direction Armstrong traces out but leaves for us to understand and assess.

Remember that these implicit dimensions are always virtual. An essay on the politics of AIDS, for example, may not be explicitly related to an article on bicycles in West Africa. But between them a connection could still be made, an important and original one. While some connections might seem potentially more fruitful and easily forged than others, improbable connections have sometimes revealed enormous vistas of knowledge. In practice this means that the most creative readers are also those most willing to take constructive risks, exploring connections that others have overlooked. At the same time, a connection must be credible, and the more sustained that connection becomes—the more deeply and widely it extends across the details of the texts at hand—the more persuasive the interpretation that arises from it.

The most basic form of interpretation starts when we connect one part of a text with other parts. Consider, for example, the first sentence of Jonathan Boyarin's "Waiting for a Jew." "My story begins in a community," he writes, "with an illusion of wholeness." Needless to say, this statement can stand alone, but it also serves as a point of departure. Practically every detail that follows in Boyarin's account can be connected in some way to this key phrase "the illusion of wholeness." Sometimes the experiences he recalls may appear to underscore the word *illusion*, confirming the irreparable loss of the community in which he had grown up. But other moments in his narrative might speak directly to *wholeness*—to the persistence of communities of shared belief in the midst of a larger, unbelieving world. Explicitly, of course, Boyarin's text makes no such point, but implicitly the point is waiting to be made, and by making it we become interpreters of the text.

When we read for content, we are reading to preserve the knowledge made by others. But when we read for implicit connections, we become

cocreators with the authors themselves. To recapitulate some portion of Boyarin's narrative might help us pass a quiz or defend a point of view in the context of a debate, but when we use Boyarin's narrative as an opportunity to make connections of our own, we join in the same questioning that started him on his path. The purpose of such reading is not to get the "right answer" but to understand more fully the world in which we live, a process literally without end. In this sense, the best interpretations leave the texts behind as they move forward, toward other questions and other texts.

### Connective Thinking: The Search for a Shared Horizon

Much of formal education promotes mimetic, or imitative, thinking: we learn to reproduce information already collected and organized by someone else. Mimetic thinking presupposes the adequacy of knowledge in its present state. But what happens when we discover that our knowledge leaves something out? Perhaps the lecture in English class this afternoon contradicted a point made yesterday in anthropology class. Or perhaps an assigned article has described an aspect of the social world in a manner that we find inaccurate or disconcerting. On occasions like these, when we encounter the limits or defects of knowledge, mimetic thinking cannot help us; instead, we are obliged to think connectively—to think *across* domains of knowledge rather than thinking from within them.

Sometimes connective thinking happens in response to crisis. The complex body of knowledge we call immunology, for example, has advanced rapidly in an effort to counter the spread of HIV and AIDS. So, too, a growing crisis in farming, caused by the overuse of pesticides, has spurred extensive research in plant genetics. But whether or not real-world crises bear down on us, the construction of knowledge of any kind necessarily produces contradictions. In his essay "Playing God in the Garden," Michael Pollan describes the reactions of Idaho farmers to the biotech industry. Even if we do not share Pollan's ambivalence about genetic engineering, few readers would doubt the truthfulness of the evidence he presents. And fewer still would question Pollan's abilities: his account is well written, carefully researched, and coherently organized. It is precisely the coherence of Pollan's case, however, that limits its value for readers. At best, because he is just one person, he can offer us only one perspective.

As soon as we have read more than a single text, we encounter discontinuous images and perspectives of the world that we must somehow reconcile. Precisely because most accounts are more or less true to the perspectives they adopt, the way out of this discontinuity seldom lies with a blanket rejection of one perspective or another, a simple "right" or "wrong." Instead, the most constructive and creative response is to search for a larger shared horizon, a new way of thinking that is broad enough in scope to do justice

to both accounts. This search is not quite the same as “compare and contrast.” After all, we can endlessly compare and contrast details that are relatively trivial and that do not bridge the gaps between texts. A shared horizon, on the other hand, is more inclusive than either text alone and often connects them on the level of implications, not explicit claims. And once a shared horizon presents itself, the connections we make gradually prompt us to explore questions we raise—and answer—for ourselves.

When an observer of world events like Amy Chua contemplates the rise of ethnic violence, she proposes that different societies may need to follow different routes to economic and political development. On the other hand, Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher, looks askance at any claim that cultures other than ours must be judged exclusively by their own standards. Confronting these two disparate positions, we are bound to be puzzled about their possible connections. Do the two arguments simply contradict one another? If they do, then perhaps you will find Chua’s reasoning more persuasive, or perhaps you will favor Nussbaum’s position. However, no two essays simply exist in a state of contradiction. To a greater or lesser extent they will also confirm and complement one another. We might assume, as Nussbaum does, that everyone stands to benefit from accepting Western values, yet imposing our values elsewhere in the world may increase social tensions to the breaking point. Conversely, we might prefer to believe, along with Chua, that differences of culture and history need to be respected. But what happens when respect for cultural differences leads us to ignore the suffering of women and minorities? The point of connective thinking is not to say “yes” to one writer and “no” to the other. Nor is it to declare blithely that we all have a right to our personal opinions. Instead, connective thinking allows us to explore the many ways in which the two discussions might fit together, forming a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Connective thinking is creative and independent in a way that mimetic thinking can never be. No matter how ably we summarize the views of Chua and Nussbaum, this is not the same as connecting them within the context of a larger question or debate. Yet these connections are never waiting for us fully formed already: there is always the need for a leap of imagination. Chua’s primary concern is the alleviation of global instability, the burden of which often falls most heavily on minorities and “outsiders.” Nussbaum’s goal may very well be to overturn established social orders everywhere if they violate universal norms of justice. At first, when we consider these differences, no shared horizon may present itself, but we can push our thinking farther. The best advice is not to stop at what the authors have said but to ask about the implications of their ideas—to ask how the issues they have raised might have an impact on us personally and how they might affect both our society and our world. Chua and Nussbaum may appear to be miles apart at first, but a shared horizon might begin to open up when we contemplate the possibility that universal standards of human

conduct could obligate us to respect many cultural differences, or when we recognize that both authors share a basic commitment to social justice and human happiness.

### Writing to Tell, Writing to See

Mimetic thinking goes hand in hand with writing to tell—writing for the purpose of demonstrating mastery over an existing body of information. In American schools, the classic example of writing to tell is the venerable book report. Like mimetic thinking, writing to tell has its appropriate place. Connective thinking calls, however, for writing of a different kind, which might be described as writing to see. In this case, the writer has to do something more than recount the knowledge of others; like connective thinking, it is an active pursuit in which the writer takes that knowledge somewhere new. In the act of writing to tell, people give answers. In the process of writing to see, we start with a question inspired by others and go on to explore what they have left unexplored; we engage in the kind of writing that higher education at its best can foster: exploratory writing, writing to see. A good example of such writing is “The Mind’s Eye,” by Oliver Sacks. Because Sacks is a neurologist—an Oxford-trained physician and a professor of medicine—we might have expected him to present some of the answers he has found in his four decades of research. Instead he begins with a question, one that seems startling in its simplicity: “to what extent are we . . . shaped, predetermined, by our brains, and to what extent do we shape our own brains?” In his attempt to think through the question he has posed, Sacks might have drawn on research by other specialists in fields like chemistry, genetics, and neuroanatomy. He might have taped electrodes to the heads of volunteers or studied their brains with an MRI machine. But instead, the sources Sacks decides to work with are books written by people who have adapted to blindness in a surprising variety of ways.

It may have been the case that the question Sacks poses—do our brains shape us, or do we shape our brains?—has followed him from the earliest years of his medical practice. But he may have formulated the question only after he had read the books he refers to in his essay. What seems certain, no matter how his project began, is that Sacks realized sooner or later that these books called into doubt much that he had once assumed about the development of the brain. On the one hand, his training led him to believe that the tasks handled by the different areas of the brain were essentially fixed after childhood. On the other hand, accounts by people who had lost their sight strongly suggest that brains can rebuild themselves—that brains are capable of significant change, even far into adulthood. We cannot know exactly what inspired Sacks to write, but surely one powerful motive was the discontinuity between his old assumptions and the new evidence.



Discontinuity is where the most valuable and valued writing starts. From time immemorial, teachers of English have told their students to begin the task of writing only after they know clearly what they want to say. These instructions have always expressed more fantasy than truth. Typically, a position—a thesis or argument—will remain fairly vague until we have done a great deal of preliminary writing. Discontinuities lead us to the search for a shared horizon, and from this shared horizon our own questions come. Then, provided we are willing to push far enough, a coherent position begins to emerge, not all at once in a grand vision but cumulatively, with one insight building on the next. At some point, as these insights begin to cohere, we recognize the direction of our thoughts, a direction that writing itself has revealed. We write and then we see where our writing has taken us. Only then are we in a position to convey our discoveries to others in a well-crafted presentation.

In order for Sacks to become a source for our own writing, we need to start with a question his work leaves unresolved. If human brains are inherently as flexible as he suggests, then why do people usually seem so similar in their outlooks and behavior? Could it be that education, and not nature or evolution, has made us all the same? If at some point in the future we abolish formal schooling, would our mental lives become far less uniform than they are now? Of course, each of us is free to conclude that human nature will never change, regardless of our brains, and in that case we might choose to brush aside the implications of Sacks's ideas. But these ideas might also prompt us to rethink a number of our presuppositions. If events in our lives are actually capable of changing the structure of our brains, then perhaps we are doing serious damage to ourselves when we spend countless hours glued to television shows that routinely push their viewers into emotions like envy, anger, and contempt. Could it be that we need to care for our mental health much as we care for our bodies through diet and exercise? As we set out to explore questions of this kind, we might also draw on Martha Stout's discussion of the way the brain responds to psychological trauma. Or we might make some fruitful connections to Robert Thurman's thoughts about the pursuit of wisdom. Ultimately, through our reading and thinking, we might start to develop a position of our own.

### Developing a Position

A position is not exactly an argument in the ordinary sense of the word. In everyday speech, the term *argument* suggests an adversarial stance: we might argue for, or against, William Greider's ideas about worker-owned businesses. "Making an argument" tends to mean deciding ahead of time what you think about an issue and then finding "support" to back up your points. There is, however, another way. Instead of simply ratifying an

existing belief, each of us can use the readings to formulate a position of our own. To do so is to imagine ourselves in a different way, not as combatants but as participants in an ongoing conversation. Even if we read a writer with distaste, what matters most are the questions raised, not the answers given. Precisely because the search for a position begins with some degree of uncertainty, it requires a willingness on our part to suspend judgment and to pursue ideas wherever they might lead. It is important to remember that this pursuit does not require complete assent or unwavering commitment. We can always explore ideas that we eventually reject. The proper spirit for writing to see might be described as exploratory and experimental.

An experiment involves a "dialogue" between projection and revision. First, we imagine or "project" an outcome based on our prior knowledge and experience. We make an educated guess about the conclusion we will probably draw from our reading of an author or authors. Perhaps we start with the claim that Chris McCandless, the young man whose travels and death Jon Krakauer retraces, was spoiled and self-deceiving. Yet when we turn to Alexander Stille's account of alternative attitudes toward the natural world, our opinion of McCandless may grow less clear. As we write, our thinking may appear to lose its way and we may realize, after three or four pages, that we have contradicted ourselves. Perhaps McCandless's actions now seem justified, even commendable. Instead of treating this change in our position as a failure or a lapse, we should appreciate its value as a discovery, which we could make only after a great deal of hard work. And rather than return to our original stance, we should revise what we have written in order to present a revised position. But revision, too, involves experiment and discovery. The point of a new draft is never simply to change a position: the point is also to explain how and why the position has changed.

### **The Spirit of the New Humanities**

Because we can learn from everything, no one should fear making mistakes. We should never forget that the greatest thinkers of every age have often been refuted later, whereas ordinary people have sometimes lived more wisely than they were given credit for. Not so long ago, the best-educated Europeans believed that all celestial bodies beyond the moon were eternal and changeless. The learned taught that matter in every form could be reduced to the basic elements of earth, air, fire, and water. Medical experts sternly warned against the perils of regular bathing and eating whole grains. In sexual reproduction, men were supposed to contribute the blueprint, while women provided the raw material. One could spend a lifetime enumerating the follies that have passed for knowledge. And when we pause to consider such a checkered history, we might decide that education is itself a folly.

But maybe not. Instead of expecting knowledge to be true once and for all, we might try to see it as pragmatic and provisional, always subject to revision given further evidence or new circumstances. In our society today, the sciences may offer the best example of this experimentalist attitude, but some philosophers and artists of every generation have also refused the twin consolations of dogmatism and disillusionment. In the years ahead, our society will face many challenges—environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political—that are sure to seem overwhelming. Given the high level of uncertainty that has become a constant feature of our lives, people may be drawn to ideologies that promise truths exempt from all revision and insulated from the challenges of diversity. If this book does nothing else, we hope that it will offer an alternative more compatible with the values espoused by the readings we have chosen: trust in the world, and trust in ourselves.

### Web Site

For details on the companion Web site [www.newhum.com](http://www.newhum.com), please refer to the inside cover. This Web site provides many helpful materials for both students and instructors.

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