

*Juliet Mitchell*

## **Psychoanalysis and the Humanities: Old Endings or New Beginnings?**

It is a common perception that there is something about the position of the humanities today which is eroding them from the inside. In this postmodern, post-structuralist world there is a concept of man—or, rather, of the absence of man—which is apparently destroying the humanities from the inside out, eating away at the old disciplines and institutions such as literature departments and literary study.

That perception is what I am going to talk about today. I shall end by illustrating my argument from the two areas of my personal concern: psychoanalysis and feminism. However, I do want to start by saying that I feel very strongly the importance of what was said here yesterday concerning the erosion of the humanities from without—that's to say, by the current emphasis on vocational schooling, business skills, and the like. I *do* think that the humanities' task is to teach people critical thinking rather than the acquisition of skills. If, as has often been suggested, we find ourselves in an historical period when the academy is moving away from thought-oriented processes and toward skills-acquisition processes, then that is currently important and historically interesting. It's also something to be regretted. I think it's a movement that begins in our schools at the primary level here and in Britain.

As I was reflecting on the title of this conference, "The End/s of the Humanities," I happened to read an article by Fredric Jameson from which I want to quote. It's an article on "Post-modernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." Jameson begins his article with the following words:

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that: the end of ideology, art or social class, the crisis of Leninism, social democracy, the welfare state, etc.<sup>1</sup>

It is quite true as a phenomenon of our culture and our time that we tend to talk about the end of this or of that. Even as recently as twenty or thirty years ago, we used to talk about the *age* of this or that: the age of reason, the age of elegance, the age of anxiety. But never the *end* of something. So, if nothing else, this preoccupation with the end of something is an historical phenomenon that we ought think about, because it's a symptom of something. I don't want to say that we *are* at the end of anything; but I want to ask why we are so preoccupied with ends?

The end of something is unthinkable. It's like death: your own death is the one thing you can know nothing of. By definition, if we are at the end of something we can say nothing about it. But ends are thinkable in that they relate to beginnings: "In my end is my beginning," and so on. When we talk or think about ends we must be thinking, too, of beginnings. So, if we look at the ends of all the things which Jameson discusses, we must look too at their beginnings. In his terms, this must be a millenarianism the right way up. The highpoint, the florescence of millenarianism was, of course, the seventeenth century. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries see the beginning of capitalism after feudal and monarchical society, and they are also the time of the rise of the humanities as we know them today. So we have there, in a sense, a neat beginning (though it's really only what Freud, referring to birth, called an impressive caesura—not necessarily a real beginning but only something we conceptualise as a beginning).

(As an aside, I should say that I'm construction here only a very schematic historical account which, although it has a purpose to it, may not be academically very correct or sophisticated. Since I'm not now an academic but a practising psychoanalyst, I can perhaps bring to these issues nothing more than a fool's questions. But even that is rather an honourable role, since in Sam Weber's words the fool has always been the transgressor. It would be rather pleasing to be that, but I'm afraid I might be bringing only a fool's answers. But please bear with me and with my schematic history.)

The rise of the humanities in the sixteenth century, and the rise of what was to be called humanism by the time of the nineteenth century, starts with the study of Greek and Roman cultures. This is a study, simply, of man's culture. But also it is a study of man without his own God. That's to say that, although the Greek and Roman cultures had their gods, they were not the Catholic God of the people who were beginning this study of mankind; nor the Protestant God of later periods of humanism. So there is in the sixteenth century a split between this new study of mankind and man's actual religion. The

emergent humanities studied man in his culture but without *his* God, without the religion of the world around him.

The "mediaeval world picture" could be said to have placed man, called man into being or given him a position, a place from the point of view of his own conception of God: God called one into one's place. Man conceives of God, God then calls on man and places him. Once the study of mankind is divorced from the actual religion of a society something interesting happens. There comes about a split in morality. This split comes together again in the nineteenth century with Christian humanism, but initially what you have is a study of mankind separated off morally from his religion. Man is no longer placed by his own conception of God, but rather is himself in the ascendant—he calls on himself. Man is placed firmly at the centre of his own culture. This is a development absolutely essential to the conception of the humanities as such. The attitude that treats man as ascendant, as the centre, is the essence of what the humanities are about.

At the same time as this happens, there arises a paradox. Someone in the thirteenth century, thinking about a Catholic God, would have known that God had placed him where he was; and yet he also would know himself as the perceiver of this God who has placed him. The humanities, by looking directly at man from the position of man, conflate man as perceiving subject and man as object. As man becomes ascendant, the focus of his own cultural studies, *by the very same token* he also becomes decentred. Man ascendant and man decentred are two sides of the same coin; the same history gives rise to apparently opposite conceptions. This contradiction, this dialectical relationship between the ascendancy of man and his disappearance is what's at stake, for example, in the Copernican revolution. The humanities and the sciences arise at the same time; they are opposites only insofar as they are involved in a dialectical relationship with one another. In fact, each is the condition of the other. The sciences mark the decentring of man. The history of the sciences (the observational sciences), from Copernicus, to Darwin and to a certain aspect of Freud, demonstrates the disappearance of man as perceiver. This is the source of the notion of the 'transparent' observer.

In order to think the position of man in the universe, Copernicus and Darwin have to think from a place where they are not; they can no longer place themselves at the centre of the picture, as it were. What happens with Copernicus is that man as the centre of the universe gets pushed aside, marginalised. Similarly, what happens with Darwin is that man ceases to be the centre of creation and becomes marginalised. This decentring seems to me to be the condition which gives rise to the

very possibility of the sciences as such. It's the flip side of the same coin that gives rise to the humanities.

The dialectical tension between the two tendencies is made very clear in the eighth book of *Paradise Lost* where the archangel explains to Adam the two ways of looking at the world—the Ptolemaic or the Copernican. Milton could not, at that time, have written his epic poem from a purely Copernican point of view. This is because Ptolemaic man is perceiving man and hence, more correct about his perceptions: for us as perceiving humans, the sun *does* rise in the east and travel across our world. Poetically speaking, we're still Ptolemaic; scientifically speaking we're Copernican. Milton does stress the Copernican view slightly more in *Paradise Lost*, but he hastens to say that Adam needn't bother to think about tensions too much. This seems to me to express the problem in a nutshell. If we think of ourselves as the centre of the universe we have moved away from a religious world ordering to a man-oriented world; but we look at ourselves in that place we also see ourselves disappear. Man becomes decentred—and this is the central paradox in Copernicus, Darwin, Freud.

So we can claim that the humanities and the sciences are related in this dialectical way. In the humanities themselves, where man is in the ascendant, there must be available a concept of man with an identity which is no longer given through his conception of God but which has to come from somewhere within himself. I'll return to that idea in a moment: it is an essential requirement of the humanities that man should have access to an idea of an identity from within himself. The sciences, on the other hand, build upon the premise of the disappearance of the essence of the observer. Within this relationship between the sciences and the humanities, it's not a question (as it's often said to be) of science somehow being able to transcend ideology, but rather a question of a constantly changing and uneven interaction between the two conceptions: man ascendant and man decentred.

This dialectic has been in operation for the last four hundred years. I suspect that what we are witnessing now is one of the moments of change and transition; that what I mentioned earlier, the erosion of the humanities from within (the rise of deconstruction and post-structuralism, etc.) is just one of the shifts between those two always-related concepts. On the other side of the coin, the sciences have had to become conscious of the observer—yet such consciousness contradicts their enterprise. So it's not exactly that we are witnessing the end of the humanities. Rather, something is happening within the humanities which tends to decentre man from within his own domain. My hunch is that while this world-order continues, humanist man will always sur-

vive, will always reappear because of this necessary dialectical relationship between the two conceptions.

As I said before, if we look at the notion of man ascendant and see it to be the essential character of 'narrative man,' (that is, historical man), we see that there has to exist some accompanying notion of man's identity. Indeed, this is the premise on which we begin the study of man in all areas of the humanities. Currently, we can see a kind of 'scientific' intrusion into the humanities (and, conversely, a humanistic intrusion into the sciences). The humanities now have a scientific side, a decentring aspect: a side of 'textuality,' the post-structuralist's claim that we are not agents of what we do, but rather the absent centre of all the structures around us; that man does not speak language but language speaks man; and so on.

This kind of idea has in fact been familiar, in a sense, ever since the sixteenth century and it is the necessary prelude to the rise of science. So the 'crisis' in the humanities is really just a flip of the coin. The humanist essence on which the humanities have depended is now showing its obverse side. I want to suggest that psychoanalysis is important for our concerns in this regard, because it addresses the cusp between the two concepts that I've been trying to define. Psychoanalysis speaks to a juncture in the dialectic insofar as it contains both a notion of how man's identity is set up, how the 'I' of the humanist is established, and also proclaims the possibility of a scientific understanding of how man is decentred, or of how he is not present even to his own consciousness. Psychoanalysis is thus humanist and counter-humanist at the same time. I want to use two major psychoanalytical thinkers as illustration of this claim that psychoanalysis speaks to the two sides of this dialectic.

The two psychoanalysts I've chosen to mention are Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein. I could have chosen Lacan in conjunction with some representative of the predominantly American school of ego psychology, but that would have been simply to choose opponents who have no relationship between them. I choose Melanie Klein here partly because her work is surprisingly little known in North America, despite the fact that she is probably the most well-known and influential analyst in Latin America, Italy, increasingly in France, and of course in Britain. More importantly, the opposition of Klein and Lacan is one of relationship.

There's a passage in Klein's work which proposes that a prerequisite to any psychoanalytical treatment must be the capacity of the analysand to have some drive to know him or her self. Now that's so much at the heart of the humanist dimension of psychoanalytical theory that it leads directly to Klein's clinical work. I think there's an awful lot to be

said for it: there really does have to be a drive to know what you simply don't want to admit about yourself, however schizophrenic or whatever else you might be, and it's that urge that really counts in psychoanalytical therapy. What's more, it is an idea that speaks to the central core of the humanist endeavour and its assumption that there is a self, an identity to be known. Even if that self has been brought about historically by interaction with others and with the environment, the basic assumption is still that there is a self for us to know.

The opposite of that conviction is represented in Lacan's work. Lacan starts from the assumption that there is no self to know and that the ego is nothing more than a gesturing clown created in an alienation from the self; that, indeed, there is no self. For the humanist, then, there is a man, woman, somebody who has an identity; Lacan, on the other hand, promotes the scientific decentring of that concept of identity. For Lacanian thinking there is nobody there any longer. "A certificate tells me that I was born. I repudiate this certificate: I am not a poet, but a poem. A poem that is being written, even if it looks like a subject." (Lacan).

These two poles of thinking within psychoanalysis are equally influential. And for good reason: it makes sense that two opposite poles should exist together, because they are related as the two sides of our coin. The origins of both these diverse concepts are in the writings of Freud himself. Psychoanalysis here proves to be a miniscule model of what I was trying to describe as the twin growth of the humanities and the sciences from the sixteenth century onwards. We can have, even within a single discipline, two different strands: one contributing to the image of man ascendant, man as the identity at the centre of creation; the other offering a decentring of those very same notions by marginalising the very concept of an identity or a self. Freud himself began by seeing himself working in the mode of the natural sciences; he thought of himself as a 'transparent' scientist faced with the unknown. (Incidentally, the unknown comes to be represented for Freud by the feminine—but that's the matter of another discussion.) He saw himself faced with something of the unknown which he—like any other scientist—has to organise, order, unify and make coherent, whether it is hysteria, dreams or any other psychological phenomenon. However, Freud then sees that, because his work concentrates directly on man as perceiver, he himself cannot actually be that 'transparent' observer. At this point he develops a conception of the ego which establishes the ego as a kind of mechanism for systematising the unknown. In other words, scientific observation itself becomes a myth as far as Freud is concerned: science becomes a story of an ego which is used to explain what we don't understand.

At this stage the conception of the ego goes off in two directions—what I'm calling for simplicity's sake, the humanist direction (as in Klein) and the scientific direction (Lacan). On the one hand, if you look at Freud's conception of the ego's construction it can be seen to appeal directly to the humanist's conception of man. The word 'identity,' so beloved of Erikson and others, has its root in 'idem'—the same. Thus what is claimed in the humanist dimension of psychoanalytical theory is that the ego is built up from a series of identifications with objects, humans, parts of human beings that had been important to it. This means that what goes to form the ego is something that can be taken in which is the same as yourself, your identity. Or, rather, you make it the same as yourself in constructing your sense of identity. A common example of this process would be the suckling baby who, having temporarily lost the mother's breast as the mother goes away, hallucinates the breast so as to have it inside itself. It makes all the pleasurable sensations of the breast and its milk into something within and the same as itself. Similar kinds of identifications gradually build up to form an ego or an identity.

That conception of the construction of the ego—I've described it only crudely here—was adopted by Melanie Klein. The assumption is that there is always from the beginning some kind of basic ego who is, as it were, in charge of that process; that there is always an ego, an 'I' which takes objects and images into itself and thus adds to itself until it forms a coherent identity. Freud, I think, didn't say anything like that. What Freud said was that such a conception would lead in a particular direction—the direction I'm calling humanist—and would enable you to trace out a kind of narrative about the subject or write about a subject's history (as he did with Dora) in order to show how the self was built up through a series of identifications of the sort that I described. What Freud more particularly stressed was that we don't start out in life with any such ego; rather, we start out with something merely pre-psychical, namely, a biological condition of helplessness.

Humans are different from animals in that they are born in this condition of helplessness. The human baby is always born prematurely so that it is dependent upon its environment and upon others in a way that animals are not. That biological helplessness produces the affect of anxiety: there's always the danger that the human baby will be dropped, that it won't get enough air or food, and so on. Through the experience of this helplessness and the anxiety that comes with it, the human neonate begins to build up some defences. What emerges from this is an ego defending against the prospect of dangers. One possible danger is that objects in the world are not the same as the baby and cannot be accommodated as anything but a threat: the other. When

the baby is able to imagine that it can take in the mother's breast, it feels safe; when on the other hand the baby realises that it cannot and that the breast belongs to someone else and cannot be made part of the baby, it has to be extruded, pushed out, made other. That's because it is threatening in its otherness and the baby has to make itself independent of it. A separation is made.

This, then, is an ego created only on the basis of an affect of anxiety; it is created against the threat that something might not be identical with the self and thus cannot be used to create the self. That leads very clearly to the position where there is no ego except as a set of defences against what is other, different, not able to be assimilated into the self.

At this point, I want to introduce what, for me, links psychoanalysis to feminism, and both, in turn, to this problem of the humanities. One thing that is not the same for the little boy is the feminine. Thus one of the things not taken in by the masculine subject (the masculine subject being, I think, the nub of this psychoanalytic conception) is femininity itself. Femininity comes to be seen as something that cannot be taken in or made the same as one's self. That's the very conception of sexual difference—the feminine as other, or as what is different and cannot be made the same, identical.

It's this latter conception that one branch of feminism has latched onto in psychoanalysis because it explains why the feminine is the point of difference; or because it explains that difference is not about women, but about femininity itself. But another branch of feminism has pursued the more humanistic possibility, which is to try to discover what is the essence of being a woman, what is the history or sociology of women that makes them different from men. I think we find these two branches in feminism in the same way as we find them in psychoanalysis itself, and just as we find them within the dialectical relationship between the humanities and the sciences. So the women's movement is itself split in this way. I don't mean split in a political sense (even though that may be the case), but split in its conceptualisation—between an orientation toward the discovery of what women *are* or what their identity is, and an orientation toward a scientific decentring of the feminine into something which is simply the product of a predetermined conception of masculine identity.

I'd want to stress, myself, that this predetermined identity is shared by both sexes in the sense that it is built up before the division that creates sexual difference. In other words, both men and women have as the position of their 'I,' or as the defensive dimension that is their ego, a conceptualisation which places the feminine as the other. This, of course, leads to one of the central dilemmas for women in what used to be known as 'consciousness-raising groups,' and for women in



analysis: namely, the double position of being the 'humanist' woman (knowing what the history or the narrative of being a woman is), but also having the sense of the extraordinary absence of anything that could be called 'the feminine.' Femininity is only a concept about difference, of what cannot be made the same. It isn't anything in and of itself; it's just the location of difference.

To return now to my beginnings: if we are talking about the ends of things and about the relationship between beginnings and ends, I don't know (and I don't see how one could know) whether what we are witnessing in the humanities now is a *final* stage, or whether it's just a temporary adjustment in the dialectic between the two positions I've outlined—man ascendant and man decentred. If it is an ending, a resolution of the whole dialectic into a new world view arising from a whole new mode of production and a whole new form of society, then we are certainly up against some serious problems. If we really are at the end of the humanities, then we must also be at the end of the sciences. Perhaps that is what we're seeing in this efflorescence of business skills, vocational courses, silicone valleys and that whole landscape of technology; perhaps we really are moving towards some new mode of production (though goodness knows what it would actually be). It may well be that technological skills are beginning to have the same status as did artisanal skills in the mediaeval world; and that we are seeing a growth of vocational skills in our universities appropriate to a new and emergent mode of production. Perhaps we will have, as in mediaeval times, an elite of scholars in the universities who bear no organic relationship to the work that they do, along with a mass of people doing technological work.

If the arguments that we hear so often are correct, then that will be our world. But perhaps we are not at such a point of crisis. Perhaps we're just at one of those twists in the spiral or at one of those cusps in the dialectical relationship between the humanities and the sciences, between man triumphant and man decentred.

#### NOTE

- \* *Ed. note:* This paper is transcribed from a talk given by Juliet Mitchell at Miami University's "End/s of the Humanities Conference," October 21-23, 1984. She thanks the Society for Critical Exchange for recording this work.