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## Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism (Book Review)

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**Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism**, by Ernesto Grassi; 103 pp.  
Binghamton, New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1983, \$12.00.

Students of Heidegger and of Italian Renaissance humanism should not be put off by the apparently strange juxtaposition of themes indicated by this book's title. Ernesto Grassi has been a creative and productive scholar regarding both Heidegger (with whom he studied at Freiburg) and of humanism, although because of the vagaries of translation and transatlantic reception he is probably best known to those who read only in English as an important commentator on Vico.

The present book is a brief and clear version of theses that Grassi has developed in more detail in his many German publications. He challenges Heidegger's ambitious story of the history of philosophy, thinking part of what is unthought in that brilliant but overly schematic account of the metaphysics of presence from Plato to Heidegger ("The Question Concerning Technology," and "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking"). Heidegger had attacked humanism and Sartrean existentialism in his 1946/47 "Letter on Humanism" (published, incidentally, by Grassi). Yet while identifying humanism — as exemplified by Hegel, Sartre, and the implicit voluntaristic metaphysics of the technological worldview — as the destiny and denouement of Western philosophy, Heidegger never mentioned Renaissance humanism. (As Grassi notes, Heidegger's view of Latin as a coarser, less profound language than Greek — or German — tells us much about the reasons for Heidegger's ignorance here.)

Grassi argues two interrelated claims: (1) In Renaissance humanism's concept of poetry and metaphor as productive of the truth, one finds a significant movement of thought that does not fit Heidegger's version of philosophy's history as a continual rationalization and narrowing of the concept of the world; (2) Renaissance humanism suggests the possibility of a thought that is both informed by an attempt to draw on the poetic resources of language for philosophical illumination and sensitive to the radically historical character of human existence, while yet (in contrast to Heidegger) retaining some of the humanistic virtues of clarity, responsibility, and concern for the city of man as a continuing conversation of many voices. The first claim is similar in purpose to Jacques Derrida's rereadings of some of the "steps" in Heidegger's grand narrative, although Grassi's style poses none of the difficulties to the uninitiated that Derrida's does. The second claim may recall the thought of philosophers like Richard Rorty and David Hoy who have suggested the possibility of something like a "postmodern" pluralistic, democratic humanism that could dispense with any transcendental grounds. Here Grassi is closer to the Heideggerean notion of *Gespräch* as productive of truth than to the pragmatic and Deweyan interpretation of "conversation" in postmodern analytical philosophy. (Grassi has recently edited *Das Gespräch als Ereignis: Ein Semiotisches Problem*, based on a continuing series of actual conversations — the *Zürcher Gespräche* — that are committed, although not uncritically, to this Heideggerean project.)

The Renaissance humanism discussed by Grassi here is not of the Platonizing kind represented by Marsilio Ficino. It is, generally, an earlier, explicitly antischolastic movement that is perhaps undervalued in the "Neoplatonic" vision of Renaissance thought that has been furthered in the anglophone world and elsewhere by the work of Paul Kristeller (Kristeller interestingly acknowledges a Heideggerean influence on the direction of his research on Ficino). The heroes of Grassi's study include more "literary" figures like Vico, Dante, Boccaccio, Leonardo Bruni, Coluccio Salutati, and Albertino Mussato. Those who are unfamiliar with some of these thinkers will be struck by the surprising thematic and even terminological convergence between them and Heidegger in regard to topics such as "unhiddenness," "clearing," and the

identity of poetry and theology. Grassi clearly shares Heidegger's belief that the time has come to seek out poetic alternatives to Western rationalism; but he is also aware of a wider range of resources, already part of the Western tradition, that may help in formulating such alternatives. Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism is an important book for those engaged in the quest for similar alternatives and for those who are considering the viability of combining postmodern, nonfoundationalist philosophy with some of the values of humanism.

University of Kansas, Gary Shapiro