Reading/Study Guide:  
Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism”

I. Thinking, Being and Humanism (217-224)

A. What might Heidegger mean when he speaks of how thinking “accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man” but it does not “make or cause this relation”? (217) What does make this relationship of human beings to Being?

B. What does Heidegger mean in speaking of how thinking “lets itself be claimed by Being”? (218) In what way does thinking “belong” to Being? (220)

C. How does Heidegger’s way of thinking about thinking and Being remain centered in humanistic concerns, for Heidegger? “Thus humanitas really does remain the concern of such thinking.” (224)

II. The Metaphysical Character of Traditional Humanism (224-228)

A. How do the various understandings of the humanity of the human involve an “interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of beings as a whole”? (225)

B. How our these traditional interpretations of the human “metaphysical”, for Heidegger? What does he mean by metaphysics?

III. Human Beings and Being (228-241)

A. What is Heidegger getting at when he says that “Man is the shepherd of Being”? In what way is “man” “thrown” from Being itself into the truth of Being”? In what way does “man” “not decide whether and how beings appear ...”? (234)

B. What is “Being”, for Heidegger? Why is it not a “cosmic ground”? (234) In what way is the “clearing itself” Being? (235)

C. What does Heidegger mean by the expression, “there is (es gibt - literally, “it gives”) Being”? In what way does the “gives” name “the essence of Being that is giving, granting its truth”? In what way is Being a “self-giving into the open”? (238)

D. What is Heidegger trying to get at when he writes, “‘Only so long as Dasein is, is there (gibt es) Being’ ... To be sure. It means that only so long as the clearing of Being propiates does Being convey itself to man. But the fact that the Da, the clearing as the truth of Being itself, propiates is the dispensation of Being itself ... The sentence does not say that Being is the product of man.” (240) In what ways is the clearing that allows beings to disclose themselves to human beings not the product of human activity? How does the “thrown” character of human projection help to illuminate Heidegger’s point (241)?

IV. The Homeland (241-255)

A. How does Heidegger associate a longing for a “homeland” with a seeking to overcome the “oblivion of Being”?

B. What does Heidegger mean when he writes, “the essence of man consists in his being more than merely human ... Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being.”? (245)

C. How is Heidegger seeking to re-define “humanism” when he suggests that it should mean “that the
essence of man is essential for the truth of Being, specifically in such a way that what matters is not man simply as such.”? (248)

V. Ethics and the Ethos (255-265)

A. Heidegger tries to return our thinking about ethics to a reflection on the meaning of the original Greek term for it, ethos. In what way, for Heidegger, does ethos name “the open region in which man dwells”? (256) What is this “open region”?

B. In what way is law (nomos) an assignment (nemein)? In what way does Being give us an assignment which functions as our most primordial “law”, providing what Heidegger characterizes as a “hold for all conduct”? (262)