



# Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Winter 2009

reflecting  
on the  
humanities

Patricia Meyer Spacks  
& Leslie Berlowitz

Don Michael Randel

Richard J. Franke

Edward L. Ayers

Francis Oakley

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About the art of glass blowing, Lino Tagliapietra states: “Glass is connected with fire. It is connected with water. It is so natural. Glass is my life.”

Lino Tagliapietra

Dinosaur

2008

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# Dædalus

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The labyrinth designed by Daedalus for King Minos of Crete, on a silver tetradrachma from Cnossos, Crete, c. 350 – 300 B.C. (35 mm, Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque National, Paris). “Such was the work, so intricate the place, / That scarce the workman all its turns cou’d trace; / And Daedalus was puzzled how to find / The secret ways of what himself design’d.” – Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 8

Dædalus was founded in 1955 and established as a quarterly in 1958. The journal’s namesake was renowned in ancient Greece as an inventor, scientist, and unriddler of riddles. Its emblem, a maze seen from above, symbolizes the aspiration of its founders to “lift each of us above his cell in the labyrinth of learning in order that he may see the entire structure as if from above, where each separate part loses its comfortable separateness.”

The American Academy of Arts & Sciences, like its journal, brings together distinguished individuals from every field of human endeavor. It was chartered in 1780 as a forum “to cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honour, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people.” Now in its third century, the Academy, with its more than four thousand elected members, continues to provide intellectual leadership to meet the critical challenges facing our world.

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*Recent trends in funding for the academic  
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# Patricia Meyer Spacks & Leslie Berlowitz

## *Reflecting on the humanities*

The essays assembled here enact as well as reflect the humanities. As they explore the twenty-first-century state of humanistic study and humanistic commitment, they exemplify historical awareness, analytic power, and critical consciousness. In all their variety and energy, these essays demonstrate that the humanities remain alive and well – despite inadequate funding, insufficient jobs, and widespread misunderstanding of what, exactly, humanistic study involves and offers to society: all topics that appear in this collection.

The confidence marking these reflections combines with a sense of urgency. The essayists project confidence not because they believe that everyone understands the importance of the humanities or because they think that all problems have been solved: quite the contrary. They delineate a set of ongoing issues, both practical and theoretical. Their confidence comes from conviction of their enterprise's value; their urgency at least partly from the need to make that value more apparent.

Humanists now have a new sense of their undertaking. Acknowledging problems in their situation and their practices, they discover and embrace fresh possibilities. Accustomed to ask-

ing large questions, humanists requested to reflect on their enterprise ask them. They offer provocative answers that often lead to further questions.

We read that humanistic knowledge is the necessary foundation of a democratic society; it can even provide a valuable basis for a career in business. We learn that the humanities reflect their times, even as they bring the past to bear on the present. To think of the “extreme imaginative poverty” of a world without literature reveals something of what the humanities do. Historians continue to find themselves under great pressure, but an evolving “postmodern” perspective might help them. Such observations suggest the range of concerns touched on here.

Arguably as significant and as important as the content of these essays is their tone. The sense of assurance conveyed by the reflections here contrasts with the atmosphere of the memorable volume published in 1997, *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, edited by Alvin Kernan, which suggested how much had gone wrong. Some of the difficulties identified by the writers in Kernan's book have actually worsened. Thus Harriet Zuckerman and Ronald Ehrenberg, examining the current state of funding for the humanities in a thoughtful, well-documented essay, conclude that there is “some [cause] for pessi-

mism, and much that leads to uneasiness” in the chronic underfunding experienced by the humanistic disciplines. They do not expect matters to improve any time soon, given that “the benefits the academic humanities confer on society are not understood well enough, by a sufficient number” – a problem that the present collection tries to address. Libraries face crises not only of funding but of space, of use, and of accessibility. Young academics have difficulty finding publishers and distinguishing themselves in a crowded profession. Those professing the digital humanities find conventional departments reluctant to use scarce resources to explore potential new directions.

Nonetheless, the writers of these reflections, from various professional perspectives (philanthropist, university president, provost, former college president, foundation executives, leading members of the professoriate), look to the future with hope and with imagination. James O’Donnell points out that there is every reason for pessimism about the future – but also every reason for optimism. He raises many questions, pointing out the need for “a combination of original work and imaginative presentation”; and he clearly believes such combination possible. Edward Ayers calls on the humanities to “put themselves in play, at risk, in the world.” Caroline Bynum imagines a way to combat excessive pressure on young academics by using insights gained from the recent studies of history as a discipline. Kathleen Woodward describes the ways serious scholarship is brought to the wider public.

Communicating the excitement of intellectual possibility, these essays dramatize the humanities’ inclusiveness: the diversity of individual contributions suggests the range of approach-

es within the broad category of humanistic enterprise. Don Randel claims as a domain of the humanities “the study of, contemplation of, and exploration of what it means to be a human being.” To engage in such study demands a broad spectrum of resources. The present collection deploys many of them.

Contributors to this group of essays had available to them a collection of new data documenting the state of the humanities in our nation. The American Academy has recently introduced the Humanities Indicators prototype, an online resource containing seventy-four indicators and over two hundred graphs and charts tracking trends in five areas: primary and secondary education; undergraduate and graduate education; the humanities workforce; humanities research and funding; and the humanities in American life. This prototype was inspired by the thirty-six-year-old *Science and Engineering Indicators* of the National Science Foundation, which has been indispensable to educators and policy-makers interested in America’s competitiveness in science and technology. Until now, no comparable compendium of data about the state of the humanities has existed. As a result, Francis Oakley has noted:

Generalizations made about the humanities, whether critical or supportive, have tended to be characterized by a genial species of disheveled anecdotalism, punctuated unhelpfully from time to time by moments of cranky but attention-catching dyspepsia.<sup>1</sup>

1 Francis Oakley, from his presentation about the Academy’s Initiative for Humanities and Culture, October 11, 2008, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



The Academy's efforts to remedy this situation have proceeded along two parallel tracks: the development of the Humanities Indicators, based on *existing* data, and the Humanities Departmental Survey project, the collection of *new* data. The Humanities Departmental Survey was sent to 1,485 departments in seven humanities disciplines: history, religion, English, foreign language, history of science, art history, and linguistics. The survey covers such topics as faculty hiring patterns, faculty teaching loads, faculty policies, tenure policies, teaching and instruction, and aspects of the student experience.

The American Academy has played a pivotal role in establishing such important institutions as the American Council of Learned Societies, the Independent Research Libraries Association, the National Endowment for the Humanities,

the Council of American Overseas Research Centers, and the National Humanities Center. The Initiative for Humanities and Culture, launched in 1998, continues the Academy's effort to advance and advocate for the humanities.

Projects under the auspices of the Initiative have involved hundreds of participants, sponsored original research, and produced several published volumes of essays exploring the state of the humanities and the evolution of its disciplines and institutions. We anticipate that ongoing projects of the Initiative, like the Humanities Indicators, along with public forums including this special issue of *Dædalus*, will continue to provide serious reflections on the humanities, inspire new ideas, and generate new conversations about the vital role the humanities play in American life.

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# Don Michael Randel

## *The public good: knowledge as the foundation for a democratic society*

While we have much to celebrate, our democracy needs continuing attention.<sup>1</sup> We might well take the view that it needs more attention now than it has in some time. Consider the terms “the public good,” “knowledge,” and “a democratic society,” for example. Who could possibly be opposed, in principle, to these concepts? But they are incomplete as we have assembled them and require a deeper foundation worthy of serious discussion.

Let’s start with knowledge. A professor of philosophy in my undergraduate years once said that in answering an examination question on topic X it is never wrong to begin by saying, “That depends on what you mean by X.” Indeed, any discussion of knowledge *does* depend on

what you mean by *knowledge*. Even without plunging into a deep discussion of epistemology and post-epistemological views of what the term might mean, we would almost certainly wish to question the role in a democratic society of what a good many people would insist on calling knowledge. What, for example, about divine revelation? Our democracy protects the right of people to believe in divine revelation and to regard that revelation as knowledge. But some of the most contentious issues before this country today are rooted in clashes over whether what some regard as divinely revealed knowledge can be the foundation for laws that must be obeyed by everyone in a democracy. And no one viewing the history of Christianity should feel entitled to single out Islam or any other religion for criticism in this context.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is modified from remarks given on the opening night of *The Public Good: Knowledge as the Foundation for a Democratic Society*, a conference organized by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society on April 27–29, 2007, in Washington, D.C. The original remarks were published in the conference proceedings, *The Public Good: Knowledge as the Foundation for a Democratic Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008).

Perhaps what we mean by *knowledge*, as a foundation for a democratic society, is instead the product of something like the scientific method, the set of propositions that we regard as accurately describing the world outside of ourselves – the “real world,” in short. Here again let us avoid a deeper discussion of philosophy that might wish to explode this whole notion. Let us instead settle for common sense. We probably mean something more like the phrase used by the American Philosophical Society, namely, “useful knowledge”: the set of propositions that work for going about the world, making things, causing certain things to happen.

This then raises the question, useful for what purposes? Today, and perhaps even in Benjamin Franklin’s day, the answer to this question is most likely, in one way or another, “To keep the American economy stronger than any other.” A close corollary is “To keep the national defense strong so as to keep our democracy strong so as to keep our economy strong.” Advancing efforts toward this end, the National Academies recently published *Rising above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*. The report argues powerfully for increased investments in education and research in science and technology:

The United States takes deserved pride in the vitality of its economy, which forms the foundation of our high quality of life, our national security, and our hope that our children and grandchildren will inherit ever-greater opportunities. That vitality is derived in large part from the productivity of well-trained people and the steady stream of scientific and technical innovations they produce. Without high-quality, knowledge-intensive jobs and the innovative enterprises that lead to discovery and

new technology, our economy will suffer and our people will face a lower standard of living.<sup>2</sup>

Economic strength, which is to say global competitiveness, and national security are the twin motives for enhancing the production of knowledge, and this will enable us to remain free and democratic. (Medical knowledge, which is not entirely unrelated to economic strength and competitiveness, is the only other kind of useful knowledge that has anything like so strong a claim on the national attention.) If you doubt that these are the principal motives for the production of knowledge – or at least the motives most likely to gain traction in this country – consider some of the kinds of useful knowledge in which we do not invest. Everyone knows that the design of acoustically superior concert halls is far from being an established science. I have long feared that this is principally because the design of acoustically superior concert halls has never been seen as essential to the national defense. Perhaps if we can relate concert halls to the national defense we can make the case to the American people that perfecting acoustics in those halls is a matter of national concern.

This instrumental view of knowledge is surely not sufficient, however, and we ought to want to make that clear. Even if we were content with this as our operating definition, it would be insufficient as the foundation of a democratic society. This has to do with our beliefs about the uses to which any kind of useful knowl-

<sup>2</sup> National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine, *Rising above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2007), 1.

edge can be put. The production of useful knowledge reached extraordinary heights in Germany in the second quarter of the twentieth century and in the former Soviet Union in the third; in neither case did it provide a sufficient foundation for a democratic society. In short, useful knowledge can be employed in the commission of the most heinous crimes and in the maintenance of the most repressive governments.

There, too, are some kinds of knowledge that we believe should not be accumulated in the first place because they are nobody's business. The right to privacy is fundamental, and yet the invasion of that privacy is sometimes thought to be justified on grounds of the protection of our democratic society – as we know only too well these days.

Another implication of the term *knowledge*, in relation to the foundation of a democratic society, is that knowledge and truth are somehow linked – that is, it cannot be knowledge in at least the instrumental sense if it is not true and subject to some reasonable verification. Thus, one should not lie. Democracy fails if the citizenry is not told the truth. We have too many cases readily at hand in which the citizenry simply has been lied to or in which powerful pressure has been placed on science to dilute or suppress altogether its public-policy findings. In a democratic society we must insist on living by “prodigious honesties,” in the words of the poet Richard Wilbur.

Now we come closer to what is missing when we say that knowledge is the foundation of a democratic society. The narrow, instrumental view of *knowledge* that often dominates our thinking needs at a minimum to be expanded or supported by *ideas* and *values* about which we may also reason, and which may even

be thought useful, but which are ultimately taken as axiomatic. Ultimately, the foundation of a democratic society is a shared *commitment* to a democratic society and all that it entails about the rights and duties of individuals. This commitment to the rights of individuals arises not out of the application of instrumental reason to the production of knowledge; it is more nearly a matter of faith or belief, often in the face of cruel reality. Above all, this commitment is of a piece with love, the manifest power of which I would decline to attribute to its mere usefulness.

This commitment leads us to the matter of the common good and its relationship to a democratic society. Unfortunately, that relationship is not unproblematic. To the extent that democracy values, indeed celebrates the rights of individuals to their own difference, it makes more difficult widespread agreement about the commitment to any particular definition of the common good – at least any definition that would be the basis for collective action. This difficulty is very much before us today, and Tocqueville warned of it long ago. The citizenry lapses into a complacency about the collectivity on the one hand and a preoccupation with individually defined spheres of identity on the other. Low voter turnout is evidence of the former; the inability of public institutions to take forceful action on pressing social problems is often evidence of the latter.

In the face of this, a strong economy and the national defense are simply the lowest common denominators to which a broad appeal can be made, never mind the great many devils in the details even here. The danger for people who care about the life of the mind is that in making the argument for knowledge as the foundation of a democratic society in instrumental terms, we adopt the modes

of thought of the enemy, as it were. A strong economy is of course a good thing – if we can figure out how to distribute the wealth humanely – and a strong national defense is of course essential – if we can figure out who our enemies really are and how to deal with them by means that need not always include the force of arms. But we ought to produce knowledge in our society simply because as human beings we cannot help but do so. The ultimate foundation of any society ought to be the human imagination, honed to the greatest degree and in the company of its faithful companion, curiosity.

Our failure to maintain the national investment in the physical sciences has, without a doubt, been myopic for all kinds of highly practical reasons. But every bit as tragic has been to hear people in high places sometimes contemplate the possibility of merely ceding U.S. leadership in high-energy physics to the Europeans, for example. This is as contrary to the spirit of this nation and to the foundation of its democracy as anything could possibly be. We ought to want to build the International Linear Collider in this country simply because we are desperate to know what it would enable us to learn; job creation in Illinois and elsewhere should be strictly secondary. Let us all remember American physicist Robert Wilson's remarks to Congress when asked about the contribution of the Fermilab accelerator to the national defense. He said it would be among the things that made the country worth defending. If we were in fact the most imaginative nation on the face of the globe, much else that we worry about today would be far along the way toward solution.

What to do about this? By all means let us strengthen the teaching of, and re-

search in, science and mathematics at all levels. But the study of what makes these undertakings truly worthwhile; the study of the values that support the production of knowledge and its proper application in society; the study of, contemplation of, and exploration of what it means to be a human being and why and how we should want to organize our lives in relation to one another around the globe: these are the domains of the humanities and the arts. And talk about underinvestment!

This is not even principally about money, because the amounts in question are so utterly pathetic. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts together made grants of just over \$200 million in 2007. There are defense contractors who have grave difficulty keeping track of amounts so small. We should spend more at the national level certainly, but also locally in K – 12 education, where the decline in arts programs has been precipitous. Above all we need to talk and act as if we truly believe that the humanities and the arts matter and underlie the deepest foundations of a democratic society. Thinking about such things does not really cost much money; it requires making the space for them in our national life and then trying to live by what we find there, no matter the method or the size of our contribution to the gross domestic product. William Carlos Williams, in one of his longer poems, helps make clear what is at stake:

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.

*Don  
Michael  
Randel  
on the  
humanities*

Later in the same poem he writes,

Only the imagination is real!  
I have declared it  
time without end.  
If a man die  
it is because death  
has first  
possessed his imagination.  
But if he refuse death –  
no greater evil  
can befall him unless it be the death of love  
meet him  
in full career.  
Then indeed  
for him  
the light has gone out.  
But love and the imagination  
are of a piece,  
swift as the light  
to avoid destruction.<sup>3</sup>

Let us strive to find the common good among our differences. Let us lay and maintain the foundation of a democratic society. Let knowledge grow. But may knowledge be amply and generously imagined, useful at times to be sure, but grounded always in a compassionate and restless human spirit.

<sup>3</sup> William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," in *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower* (London: Agenda, 1963).

Richard J. Franke

*The power of the humanities  
& a challenge to humanists*

The humanities protect and give life to our most enduring values. The very DNA of civilization is encoded in the poet's song, the painter's brushstroke, and the vibrant dialogue about ideas. Although the study of the humanities cultivates the critical thought necessary for a civil society, it has suffered neglect over the last few decades, both in terms of financial support and in the national debate on education.

Among our great universities, Harvard, Chicago, Yale, and Columbia have recently redefined their general education curricula. While all four institutions affirm that the purpose of a liberal education is to pursue knowledge without explicit concern for vocational utility, Harvard's *Report of the Task Force on General Education* empha-

sizes how education should relate to students' personal, social, and eventual professional lives. Specifically, the report declares, "The ambition of the program of general education . . . is to enable undergraduates to put all the learning they are doing at Harvard . . . in the context of the people they will be and the lives they will lead after college."<sup>1</sup>

General education curricula include the humanities and the sciences, both of which are considered necessary for a complete education. Yet federal funding for the humanities and the sciences has diverged significantly over the last thirty years. For example, in 1979 the dollar value of National Science Foundation (NSF) grants was five times greater than grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). By 1997, NSF grants were thirty-three times greater than NEH grants.<sup>2</sup> According to the NSF's 2005 annual *Survey of Research and Development Expenditures at Universities and Colleges*, total spending for sci-

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<sup>1</sup> Task Force on General Education, *Report of the Task Force on General Education* (President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2007), preface.

<sup>2</sup> John Hammer, *On Federal Support for the Humanities in Comparison with the Sciences* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2007).

ence and engineering research and development was almost \$46 billion.<sup>3</sup> Even given the most generous estimate, humanities research and development expenditures did not exceed \$1 billion in 2005.

Of course, it is difficult to compare funding between the sciences and the humanities, as much of this disparity can be explained by the high costs of scientific research. Nevertheless, through omission or commission, the value of the humanities is diminished on most scales of measurement. Moreover, the growing inequality is symptomatic of a much deeper misunderstanding of the role of the humanities in education. The U.S. Department of Education's 2006 report on the future of higher education, which addresses the decline in U.S. higher education, focuses almost exclusively on math and the sciences. The report stresses that academic programs must serve the changing needs of a knowledge economy, and it recommends that universities develop "new pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to improve learning, particularly in the area of science and mathematical literacy."<sup>4</sup> If we use this assessment of the educational demands of a knowledge economy in conjunction with the rationale for the Harvard curriculum changes as a barometer for the climate of funding, we can reasonably infer that the humanities lag so far behind the sciences, in part, because it is unclear how humanistic in-

3 WebCASPARE, Integrated Science and Engineering Resources Data System, <http://webcaspar.nsf.gov> (accessed October 15, 2007).

4 The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education* (2006), 25.

quiry and critical thinking relate to the world of everyday life.

Generally speaking, the humanities consist of languages and literatures, the arts,<sup>5</sup> history,<sup>6</sup> music, linguistics, and philosophy. While the exact definition of the humanities remains debated, this broad characterization offers a sense of the disciplinary diversity within the humanities. The common ground of such disparate fields of inquiry is critical thinking, that Socratic habit of articulating questions and gathering relevant information in order to make reasonable judgments. Although similar arguments could be mounted in other traditions, I am consciously confining myself to the Western tradition for the purposes of this discussion.

The rebirth of classicism in fourteenth-century Italy helped to revitalize the tradition of critical thinking. Petrarch's preference for the classical rhetoric of Cicero and the language of Virgil over the "barbarous inventions" of medieval Latin led to the search for lost texts in monastic libraries across Europe.<sup>7</sup> De-

5 The arts and humanities are often distinguished; the art historian *studies* art whereas the artist *makes* art. Nevertheless, good art criticism requires the imagination of an artist, and good art requires making informed decisions. In general, the humanities cultivate both our critical and creative faculties, which is precisely what makes them so useful. I want to emphasize the creative aspects of the humanities by including the arts in their definition.

6 Some universities regard history as a social science, and indeed it does straddle the distinction. As a history major and a lifelong supporter of the humanities, I tend to think of history as a humanistic endeavor.

7 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. Middlemore (London: Phaidon Press, 1944), part 3.



ploring medieval scholasticism's failure to convey essential truths persuasively, Petrarch's return to classical eloquence was a pragmatic appeal. He argued that logic and metaphysics may help us to define the nature of virtue, but only poetry and metaphor *move* us to become virtuous.<sup>8</sup>

Although the influence of classical thought is evident in late medieval writers such as Thomas Aquinas and Dante, this Petrarchan return to original sources not only generated a new appreciation for the critical thought of antiquity, but shed light on textual discrepancies long buried by church authorities. According to a document known as the *Donation of Constantine*, the Emperor Constantine had granted political authority over the Roman Empire to Pope Silvester in the fourth century. In 1440, the gifted Latinist and early humanist Lorenzo Valla proved that the *Donation* was an early medieval forgery.<sup>9</sup> Contrasting it with the rhetoric of contemporary Roman law, Valla demonstrated that the *Donation* was inconsistent with Latin of the fourth century, thus proving it was written centuries after its alleged creation. This triumph of textual criticism marked the emergence of a new kind of thinking that would dominate Renaissance Europe and that continues to shape our world today. By concentrating on the rhetorical nuances of original texts, Valla helped to inaugurate what we might today call close reading.<sup>10</sup> More impor-

tantly, by going to the original sources Valla made his argument through the intrinsic evidence of the text itself.

Intent on restoring the Bible to its original meaning, Valla went on to challenge authoritative interpretations of scripture, too, through evidence-based historical reconstruction. Before the Reformation, biblical exegesis, whereby a passage was understood to operate on four levels (the literal, allegorical, moral, and metaphysical), was conducted in and justified through church authority.<sup>11</sup> Valla's methodology, therefore, only expanded the interpretive tradition to include rhetorical and historical considerations. The Renaissance humanists then brought the full range of these methods of interpretation to non-biblical texts, ushering in a new age of critical thought and knowledge.

Critical thinking is characterized by first asking questions. Once the primary question or problem is identified, then data, evidence, and information are gathered. We make an interpretation and then compare our reading to other standard interpretations. The process of critical thinking, then, mirrors the scientific method of observation, hypothesis, prediction, and experimentation. Indeed, Lorenzo Valla's textual empiricism anticipates Francis Bacon's theory of inductive reasoning, which formalized the methodology essential for the Scientific Revolution to occur. And just as interpretations of literary texts change over time, so do scientific models and methods. Einstein's theory of relativity proves that Newton's equations are not valid on the astronomical scale, for example. But a sci-

8 Hannah Gray, *Three Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 6.

9 Diarmaid MacCullough, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided* (New York: Allen Lane, 2003), 81.

10 Ciriaco Morón Arroyo, *The Humanities in the Age of Technology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 24.

11 Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. E. Eerdmans, 2000).

entific theory is required to explain both the failure and the former success of the theory being overturned: the success of Einstein's equations depends on their ability to demonstrate that Newton's equations are accurate approximations on scales and at speeds observable in the seventeenth century.

A humanistic interpretation does not necessarily overturn other readings of a text; rather, it contributes to a tradition of interpretation. Moreover, people read literature at various levels of understanding. A poststructuralist reading of *Moby Dick* does not invalidate a Russian formalist or a literal reading. *Moby Dick* really is a story about a whale; it is also a meditation on violence, power, and obsession. It is precisely for admitting different degrees of understanding that more people are familiar with *Moby Dick* than they are with fundamental scientific concepts such as the second law of thermodynamics.

Rooted in critical thinking, both the humanities and the sciences strive for objectivity. Innovation in either discipline requires creativity chastened by analysis. Interpretations or models are always subject to further examination as new information or perspectives emerge. Take Leonardo da Vinci, the prototypical Renaissance man, for example. Formally trained in human anatomy by the sculptor Andrea del Verrocchio and renowned more so for his painting, Leonardo's studies in engineering and science are just as innovative. He honed his powers of observation after he was given permission to dissect human corpses at the Santa Maria Nuova hospital in Florence, and this habit of close inspection ultimately provided a methodology for his scientific advances in optics and hydrodynamics, as well as helped to improve

his art.<sup>12</sup> In Leonardo's case, polarity between the humanities and the sciences simply did not exist; the tradition of critical thinking inspired new inquiry in all disciplines – though a palpable difference between humanistic and scientific critical thinking, with respect to their fields of inquiry, emerged during the Scientific Revolution.

The sciences consider physical phenomena and admit only those interpretations that can make accurate, measurable predictions about the outcome of reproducible experiments. The values and personal investment of the scientists involved in making the interpretation are, in principle, irrelevant to the scientific conclusions, and the ultimate success of a theory depends only on its ability to reproduce results in the world. Explanations of incompletely understood phenomena are admissible, but until an equation or model is produced that can make measurable predictions, they remain interpretations.

When Newton declared his laws of motion in the *Principia* of 1687, he limited the domain of scientific knowledge, or experimental philosophy as he called it. Newton could not “feign a hypothesis” as to the cause for the phenomenon of gravity that his equations described, explaining that such speculations have no place in experimental philosophy. The hypothesis is necessary to initiate physical investigation, of course. But “in this philosophy,” Newton clarified, “particular propositions are inferred from the phenomena, and afterwards rendered general by induction.”<sup>13</sup> With

12 Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvelous Works of Nature and Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 251.

13 Isaac Newton, *Principia*, trans. I. Cohen and A. Whitman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 943.

this statement Newton defined modern scientific critical thinking – that the assumptions of the scientist in framing the question or hypothesis are incidental to the goal of the inquiry: to render scientific laws by induction.

In contrast to the sciences, emotions and values are always at play in humanistic inquiry, which employs critical thinking to probe the less explicitly measurable, even unquantifiable, domains of intention, meaning, and spirit that animate the human experience. As readers we are emotionally engaged in our reading of a text. We feel Raskolnikov's isolation and moral confusion in *Crime and Punishment*. The tension between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* is at once familiar and oppressive. We are appalled by the barbarism depicted in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Our assumptions about beauty are at risk when we look at a sculpture by Eva Hesse. We put our values and beliefs to the test when we read Plato, Hegel, or Derrida. We ask ourselves not only what does a text say, but how does this compare to our experience? Instead of setting our feelings and assumptions aside as is done in the sciences, humanistic critical inquiry requires that we explicitly acknowledge our own personal bias and emotional investment when reading a text, listening to music, looking at art, or addressing a problem.

In principle, the sciences use all means possible to control or limit the risk of empirical bias in order to achieve some form of objectivity. When the domain of inquiry is the inherently ambiguous life of the human spirit, which includes the world of values, emotions, and beliefs, scientific objectivity is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. In the humanities we try to arrive at objectivity, but we also acknowledge the inextricable bias of our beliefs and the emotion-

al impact of a work of art or literature. Far from lacking standards, humanistic critical thinking allows us to appreciate the sophistication of an interpretation by the degree to which it engages a text and makes explicit its assumptions.

Both the sciences and the humanities are rooted in empiricism. Science is methodologically empirical in its study of nature and attempts to remove all bias from its investigation. Acknowledging that there are subjects from which we cannot extricate ourselves, humanistic inquiry closely observes both the object of study and how we ourselves study the object. Put another way, the sciences seek exact knowledge, whereas the humanities strive for wisdom.

C. P. Snow's 1959 article "The Two Cultures" initiated a debate about the lack of exchange between the sciences and the humanities that persists to this day. With unique experience as both a novelist and a theoretical physicist, Snow notes the incomprehension among the literary establishment of some basic aspects of science, including, most famously, the second law of thermodynamics. While acknowledging that many of his colleagues in the sciences are themselves not well read in literature, Snow argues that such mutual ignorance will have disastrous consequences for generations to come. Although much of the subsequent furor centered on the veracity of Snow's observations, most of his article focuses on how to improve education in the sciences. Snow justifies his emphasis by considering the most pressing problems facing the world then, much like today, to be nuclear war, overpopulation, and the widening gap between rich and poor countries, all of which, in his estimation, are best addressed through scientific inquiry. Moreover, scientific policy deci-

sions made by democratically elected governments, he argues, require an informed citizenry to understand the terms of those decisions and subsequently elect the most qualified public officials to legislate them.<sup>14</sup>

There are two striking assumptions in Snow's analysis, especially if we imagine his developing a parallel set of recommendations for education in the humanities. First, Snow assumes that the sciences offer tangible benefits to society and that scientists and engineers do their research with these benefits in mind, even in the case of the most theoretical branches of science. Second, and just as important, he assumes the general public understands that the sciences have a clear social purpose, especially in the case of biology, medicine, and mechanics. (Admitting that we can dispute the social good of nuclear proliferation, Snow nevertheless argues that the original intention of nuclear research was for the benefit of humanity in the form of inexpensive power.) If we attempt to extend his argument to the humanities, however, we encounter a fundamental problem: most people cannot succinctly describe the social benefits of the humanities.

We need to define the social purpose of the humanities in a manner that is clear and accessible to the public. The sciences include two distinct areas of inquiry: the broadly theoretical and the specifically applied. Engineering schools train students to study the safety, feasibility, and reliability of using theoretical concepts from physics and mathematics to create new products. As a result, the sciences have a tangible public presence in the form of technological products. While the humanities have

scholarly standards, it is unclear to most people what the humanities' social purpose is or how humanistic inquiry can be used to improve one's life. Everyone involved in the humanities needs to understand and convey how humanistic critical thinking can be directly applied to solving problems in our professional lives.

The humanities are vital to public life; they help us imagine the consequences of our actions and give us the tools to make informed policy decisions. Even more, the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual discoveries of the humanities reveal what is common to the human experience and provide the foundation for a successful and fulfilling life. Everyone knows what doctors, lawyers, and plumbers are supposed to do. We need to define the purpose of the humanities just as clearly. Only when ordinary citizens understand and demand support for the humanities can policy-makers and public officials, the gate keepers of federal and state budgets, justify the allocation of funding for humanities research.

At first glance, the idea of the applied humanities seems little more than a rhetorical ploy. Engineers may apply science to solve problems, but as far as the humanities are concerned, scholars have the reputation of being the only readers of the work produced by other scholars. On the contrary, imagination and critical thinking – the root of the humanities – are essential components for a successful career in almost any profession. In addition to my recent work in the humanities, I have also spent my entire professional career at one company, John Nuveen & Co. Extraordinary growth marked the twenty-two years that I was CEO. In an age of rapidly changing technology and shifting mar-

14 C. P. Snow, *Public Affairs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 13 – 47.

kets, there was no simple formula for success. The one thing I came away with from my years at Nuveen is that the world in which we operate is fundamentally complex, unpredictable, and incompletely understood.

When I consider my forty-one years at Nuveen, I know that my business degree was not enough to prepare me for the changes and uncertainties of investment banking. Business courses alone were – and are – not adequate to prepare students for the changes that will be shaping business decisions in the next forty years. In fact, my own habits of reading and critical analysis, particularly of literature and history, and the encouragement of such study among employees were crucial to Nuveen’s success.

As a relatively young CEO, I wanted to encourage collaboration and new thinking among our employees. People who rose to leadership positions at Nuveen had to have excellent technical skills, but I believed also that a background in the humanities stood them in good stead. In order to develop new thinking at Nuveen, I introduced lectures, study groups, and other company-sponsored educational programs. I then invited scholars to discuss what we had just read and studied. These programs promoted cooperation and collaboration among employees in an unprecedented way. At the same time, our young leaders learned the importance of careful analysis of evidence and information, of expansive thinking that is open to the interpretation of others, and, finally, of developing their own judgment by applying rigorous criteria and making their assumptions transparent. In many ways, the humanities offer the ideal training for the leadership of corporate enterprises by giving young executives an opportunity to experiment

with ideas, to grow by taking risks, and to learn how to change their minds when new information or insights emerge. In other words, I was trying to broaden their imagination and sharpen the critical faculties so necessary for their success.

As ways of doing business evolve, the nature of work is becoming more intellectual. Regardless of profession, we spend most of our time representing ideas to coworkers, colleagues, and potential customers. The humanities are fundamentally about representation: the representation of ideas, emotions, and cultures. By studying the most powerful and imaginative forms of representation, we refine our communication skills, sharpen our critical faculties, and consider new ways of thinking. Moreover, as new markets emerge, knowledge of different cultures, histories, and values becomes essential for success. If we are able to demonstrate the connection between the skill of critical thinking and work performance, people will begin to think about the humanities differently. In the context of business, critical thinking teaches us how to structure questions, evaluate competing goods, and solve problems.

We can find ourselves assaulted with opportunities at work, not all of which fall within ethical boundaries, and we have to respond quickly. As a result, we must rely on an accurate moral compass. In considering the central conflict in Sophocles’s *Antigone*, for example, we confront fundamental questions about the nature of morality. We see Antigone and Creon both acting out of the conviction of their profoundly different commitments. Divine justice and family custom require that Antigone bury her brother, but Creon has to uphold the law of Thebes and deny Polyneices’s burial rights. Elemental in its contour, the con-

flict raises a host of difficult questions about what truly defines justice. Although the clash of values may be intractable, we are forced as readers to ponder the nature of moral actions in the vivid context of a play. This kind of ethical deliberation can be applied directly to making decisions in the real world. We need to understand our ethical assumptions and be able to look at a problem from different perspectives. But in order to do so, we must be prepared. By exposing ourselves to the conflicts dramatized in Shakespeare's plays or the nature of virtue in a philosophical discourse, we train ourselves to face the complexities and ambiguities of life.

The connection between the humanities and public policy can be unclear, but the arts have a long tradition of engaging pressing issues. Indeed, policy discussions often remain in policy circles because it is difficult for a large cross section of the population to anticipate the consequences of a decision based on technical data alone. Until recently, for example, the debate about climate change has gone on with limited attention from the broader public. While there is still some disagreement among researchers about the degree to which pollution contributes to global warming, a great majority involved understands that the consequences of climate change are serious, even calamitous. It is striking then that the debate has taken so long to capture public attention. The apparent indifference is due in part to our inability to imagine the repercussions of the scientific conclusions. In addition, scientific researchers are careful to limit their conclusions to what they can demonstrably extrapolate from data. It is not their responsibility to prepare us for the con-

sequences of climate change. This is precisely where the humanities have an important contribution to make to the conversation.

Artists and writers imagine and help us to understand or anticipate something we have never seen before, such as the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the Santa Ana fires of California, or the horrors of war. Our system of education needs to train students not only to value artistic vision, but also to cultivate their own imagination. As the consequences of climate change become more tangible, so do its practical and ethical challenges. In all likelihood, civilization will not end in a single cataclysm, but more gradually, in a protracted series of disasters. This raises a number of deeply troubling questions. For example, what will happen if Bangladesh is completely inundated? What would we owe the disaster-struck people of Bangladesh? Given our lack of technical and moral preparation to handle the crisis created by Hurricane Katrina, surely we are even less prepared to anticipate what we ought to do in the event of the evacuation of an entire nation.

On a more fundamental level, what is our collective and individual responsibility to future generations? As conscious beings capable of highly sophisticated forms of communication, do we have a special responsibility to perpetuate the human race and maintain biodiversity? Furthermore, the idea of cataclysm and the end of the world has a fascinating history, which for generations scholars have considered from many historical, literary, and religious perspectives. What happens when a civilization vanishes and what is the nature of our apocalyptic anxieties? These are the questions we need to be asking now, so that we more fully understand what is at stake when we make our personal and

political decisions that address climate change.

The assumption at the Chicago Humanities Festival, of which I served as chairman from its inception in 1990 until 2006, is that the humanities can provide the context for fundamental questions bridging politics, science, ethics, art, and philosophy. The 2007 festival, *The Climate of Concern*, was organized around the specter of global environmental and ecological disruption. Scholars, scientists, artists, naturalists, and philosophers were invited to the festival to bring their expertise to the myriad problems that we will face in the next century. Although many discussions addressed consensus scientific findings and their premises, *The Climate of Concern* was organized primarily around more fundamental questions. As such, it serves as a powerful reminder of the practical value of the humanities.

Scientists provide us with the empirical data crucial to making informed policy decisions, but the data tell us nothing about the implications of our decisions. For that we need artists and writers to bring those repercussions to life, scholars to remind us how others have addressed or failed to address similar problems, and philosophers to help us clarify our responsibilities. In fact, we need to bring the full range of humanistic critical thinking to bear on our most difficult choices. A citizenry exposed to the humanities is able to identify and articulate the issues most important to their lives and, in turn, make decisions with greater clarity. A free-market society committed to democracy becomes stronger and more dynamic when scholars, journalists, and ordinary citizens raise sometimes uncomfortable questions about the inherent assumptions in our policies. By questioning how a

problem is framed and critically analyzing evidence, the humanities serve as a safeguard to the public sphere. No matter your stance on the war in Iraq, we can all agree that the country would have benefited from a fuller engagement with the cultural insight and critical thinking of the humanities in the days leading up to the war.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a great work of art asks fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of life. We read to pursue answers to those questions, to see how others have addressed them. I've been involved in a reading group for over thirty years. Last year we read a selection of American literature, including Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, which I had first read soon after it was published in 1964, but without a critical eye: four decades later I have become a more critical reader. Facing the catastrophe of his own life, Moses Herzog confronts both the world of materialism, where money is God, and the literary world, where God is dead.<sup>15</sup> Against these restrictive models of modern life, Herzog considers the value of an achieved and successful life. Despite his prodigious intellect, Herzog questions the strictly intellectual life, concluding that we will be unfulfilled unless our knowledge is shored up by serious reflection and emotional honesty.

I was surprised and challenged by this reading. In the fragmentation and vicissitudes of contemporary life, what is important? How do we define a successful life? As I suggested earlier, humanistic critical thinking demands that we put our feelings, prejudices, and values at stake in our reading. We question

15 Jonathan Wilson, *Herzog: The Limits of Ideas* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 8.

our assumptions and expand our spiritual lives when we confront the ideas and experiences of others. We read to discover both the range of human experience and what is common to humanity. But above all, we read to discover and to question. And we read to affirm or recalibrate our values.

While *Herzog* wonderfully illustrates the importance and the richness of living the intellectual life, Moses Herzog finally recognizes that fulfillment comes only through an explicit engagement with the world and with others. It is this commitment to our communities and engagement with the world outside of the academy that I am asking humanists to consider. Be a spokesperson for your discipline. Teachers should show students both the joys of scholarship and the practical value of the humanities in the classroom. We will all benefit from such advocacy.

Although it is apparent to academics why critical thinking is an essential tool for living in the twenty-first century, it is obvious neither to the general public nor necessarily to those who determine curricula. Lorenzo Valla's insistence that arguments be justified by evidence rather than by authority not only led to the Reformation, but also provided the sciences with the methodology and philosophical grounding necessary for progress. Likewise, the Enlightenment would simply not have been possible without a rational ethics that compels us to proceed from facts to axioms to laws. In short, our most lasting institutions are anticipated by the spirit of critical inquiry that sent Valla back to the original manuscripts. "To the sources" was the maxim of the Renaissance humanist. The source of critical thinking are the seeds of rigorous analysis sown by the early humanist scholars and cul-

tivated by teachers and students of the humanities the world over.

In terms of the pragmatic climate of the debate around education, the value of critical thinking is incalculable. From assessing markets to identifying the salient features of a policy to decisions about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, critical thinking clears a path for rational judgment. And it is to the humanities that we are indebted for the sharpening of these critical faculties and the expansion of the imagination necessary for a responsible, productive, and successful life.

Advocates, administrators, scholars, and teachers together are responsible for educating the public about the value of the humanities. Once we have identified the values shared by the various humanistic disciplines and by disparate schools of critical thought, we need to promote the humanities beyond the academy. By increasing involvement in the humanities through its great tradition of debate, and by raising public awareness of how the humanities relate to robust and prosperous citizenship, we create a rationale for greater public funding, which can occur only through citizens' insistence that their legislators make humanities funding a priority.

Teachers and scholars of the humanities are charged with the unique responsibility to share ideas and to demonstrate how those ideas relate to the world around us, whether we are discussing Babylonian history or the novels of Saul Bellow. Just as doctors look after the health of their patients and engineers ensure public safety in their designs, so should humanists serve the public through education. All citizens of the twenty-first century, whether they are scientists or telemarketers, can use the critical thinking of humanistic inquiry to develop the emotional



honesty and analytical skills necessary to define the nature of a successful life and the best way to achieve it. In turn, all of us involved in the humanities need that sense of public service to measure the success of the work we do.

While the tangible benefits of the sciences include technological products that make life more comfortable, the humanities bring meaning to our lives through critical thinking and through great works of art. The stakes are high, as the humanities engage not only our knowledge and reasoning, but the emotions and spiritual values that drive our questions. Their reward is great, however. Through imagination, deliberation, and critical thinking, the humanities clear the path for a successful life.

*The power  
of the  
humanities  
& a chal-  
lenge to  
humanists*

# Edward L. Ayers

## *Where the humanities live*

In 1964, the historian J. H. Plumb announced a crisis in the humanities: “Alas, the rising tide of scientific and industrial societies, combined with the battering of two World Wars, has shattered the confidence of humanists in their capacity to lead or to instruct.”<sup>1</sup> Plumb’s lament would not be the last; indeed, in every decade since 1964, in addresses to professional organizations and in op-ed pieces, on blogs and in commencement speeches, humanists and their critics have warned of one crisis after another. Sometimes challengers from outside – scientists, social scientists, administrators, politicians, or advocates of corporate or utilitarian values – threaten. At other times, humanists themselves come off as the culprits, trafficking in obscurity, reaction, or political correctness. Whatever the cause, those who worry have

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no trouble finding signs of crisis: declining proportions of students and faculty positions, low funding inside the university, a diminished audience beyond the academy, disorienting shifts in the demography of students and faculty, and dislocating theoretical importations and innovations.<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly, however, today the humanities in the United States are holding their own in an intensely competitive jostling of universities, departments, and faculty for students and resources. As the Humanities Indicators

1 J. H. Plumb, ed., *Crisis in the Humanities* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964). The humanities are generally considered to include English language and literature; foreign languages and literatures; history; philosophy; religion; ethnic, gender, and cultural studies; area and interdisciplinary studies; archaeology; art history; the history of music; and the study of drama and cinema. Some parts of political science, government, geography, anthropology, and sociology – the “humanistic social sciences” – are more closely identified with the humanities than with other more quantitative aspects of the disciplines.

2 A special issue of *New Literary History*, 36 (2005), built around responses to Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s essay “Beneath and Beyond the ‘Crisis in the Humanities,’” is extremely helpful. Harpham analyzes the perennial nature of the crisis.

Prototype sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences reveals, humanities disciplines show signs of regained balance, integration, and growth, even if other fields, often vocational, are growing faster. Humanities faculty and what they teach retain authority and respect in public and private institutions, large and small. Many thoughtful and articulate students in the best schools in the country emerge with degrees in the humanities. Faculty and students from around the world come to the United States to share in its broad and robust tradition of humanistic research and teaching.<sup>3</sup>

To understand why the tradition of crisis shapes our thinking and self-perception, even while some of the reasons for worry have abated, we need to understand the many contexts in which the humanities live. They live in departments and disciplines, of course; but they also live in new places, in new forms, and in new combinations.

Though the phrase “the humanities” bears the patina of an ancient Western tradition, just as its creators intended, the aggregation of disciplines bearing that name is only about a hundred years old, taking form in the United States early in the twentieth century. The humanities played a critical integrative role as American universities moved away from training in the classical lan-

guages, the teaching of moral philosophy, and prescribed curricula. The humanities emerged as a sort of secular glue to hold together the disparate components of a higher education system assembled from elements of German research universities, Oxbridge tutelage, and French training for civil service. Humanities disciplines evolved alongside the sciences and social sciences, each new cluster of disciplines fostering, challenging, and defining the other. The idea of the humanities developed simultaneously with the machinery of the humanities.

Despite its utility, the concept of the humanities grew slowly and uncertainly until, in the 1930s, it became established in the curricula of elite institutions from the Ivy League to Chicago to Berkeley. Soon thereafter, the humanities began to anchor general education requirements across an ever-expanding range of institutions. World War II galvanized the concept of the humanities in the United States, demonstrating the need for humane understanding in a world descending into chaos. The ideological, institutional, and demographic environment of the postwar United States fueled remarkable growth in universities and in the humanities departments established there. Over the thirty years after the end of World War II, the number of undergraduates in American higher education expanded by almost 500 percent and the number of graduate students by almost 900 percent. The baby boom produced an apparently endless supply of students, better educated than any generation before. And two-thirds of them – a larger portion than today – went to college.<sup>4</sup>

3 The Humanities Indicators Prototype is sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and can be found at <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/humanitiesData.aspx>. In 2004, about 16 percent of humanities doctorates in this country went to students from abroad. For a useful perspective, see Steven Brint, “The Rise of the ‘Practical Arts,’” in *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University*, ed. Brint (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 231 – 259.

4 For helpful overviews that inform the narrative that follows, see Steven Marcus, “Humanities from Classics to Cultural Studies: Notes to-

As the federal government focused on science and engineering in the cold war, the humanities and social sciences flourished as well. Between 1955 and 1970, in fact, the proportion of students receiving degrees in the liberal arts rose for the first time in the twentieth century. Humanities departments expanded, and thousands of faculty members won tenure. In 1965, Congress, with the enthusiastic support of President Lyndon Johnson, endorsed the humanities. The legislation that created the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) declared that “because democracy demands wisdom” the NEH “serves and strengthens our Republic by promoting excellence in the humanities and conveying the lessons of history to all Americans.” Bringing to bear a model and a rationale not unlike those created to foster science and the social sciences in the cold war era, the federal government became a patron to humanities departments already flush with new students, facilities, and faculties. The NEH and humanities foundations in each of the states would, over the coming decades, invest hundreds of millions of dollars in humanists and their work, giving government sanction to the very concept of the humanities and disseminating humanists’ work throughout communities in every corner of the United States.<sup>5</sup>

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ward the History of an Idea,” *Dædalus* 135 (2) (Spring 2006): 15–21, and Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (American Council of Learned Societies, 2001), available at [http://archives.acls.org/op/49\\_Marketplace\\_of\\_Ideas.htm](http://archives.acls.org/op/49_Marketplace_of_Ideas.htm); Menand, “Dangers Within and Without,” *Profession* 8 (2005): 10–17; Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Between Humanity and the Homeland: The Evolution of an Institutional Concept,” *American Literary History* 18 (2006): 245–261.

5 Quoted in Harpham, “Between Humanity and the Homeland,” 251.

The postwar golden age, when jobs, students, raises, and opportunities flowed, would henceforth stand as the benchmark against which future lives in the humanities would be measured. The number of undergraduate students taking degrees in the humanities reached its peak in 1972, but the humanities’ relative position in the university began to deteriorate soon thereafter. A darker age for higher education began around 1975, when the draft ended, the country went into recession, the college-age population leveled off, and the economic value of a college degree began to fall. Funding for higher education decreased, and campuses found themselves with an oversupply of everything from beds to doctorates. The humanities bore the brunt. Departments were unable to hire new colleagues, and graduate students prepared for a job market that hardly existed.<sup>6</sup>

Each of the disciplines in the humanities and humanistic social sciences embarked on a turbulent period of intellectual self-examination in the 1970s and 1980s. To many, the leading disciplinary fashions of the 1950s and 1960s – the New Criticism, functionalist sociology, consensus history, rational choice, behavioralism – seemed hollow, uncritical of themselves and of the purposes they served. Thinkers who offered alternatives to American traditions of hopeful and ameliorative humanities made sense to younger faculty and graduate students. Antifoundationalists, skeptics of disciplinary conventions, and Euro-

6 For an analysis of the crisis of the 1970s, see Roger L. Geiger, “The Humanities in American Higher Education from the 1950s through the 1980s,” in *Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion Since World War II*, ed. David A. Hollinger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 50–72.

pean intellectuals who denied the very concept of “the human” won large followings. Every humanities discipline, in its own way, struggled to define its central purposes and larger mission.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, in a confluence of profound consequence, millions of women, people from underrepresented minorities, and individuals born abroad entered the U.S. higher education system while the number of white American male students declined. Faculty demographics slowly began to follow. Multicultural understanding and gender identities became widespread topics of interest. New majors, centers, programs, and institutes, many of them interdisciplinary and demanding of resources, arose across the country.

The combination of intellectual, demographic, and institutional change in the 1970s and 1980s hit the humanities hard. To younger scholars, many established disciplinary and department leaders seemed not only old-fashioned but actually opposed to honest and liberating perspectives. Undergraduates showed little interest in disciplines that seemed splintered and unsure of themselves. Best-selling books, some from within the academy itself, assailed the antitraditional humanities as out of touch with both the Western tradition and the triumph of American ideals against communism. Even the National Endowment for the Humanities, heavily politicized from the right, raged against those it had been created to sustain. If it became morning again in America in the 1980s, it seemed dark enough in the nation’s English and history departments. The language of crisis became engrained in the self-perception of the humanities.

And then something surprising – and generally unnoticed – happened. In the late 1980s, at the same time that philosopher Allan Bloom was bemoaning, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, the betrayal of Western civilization by humanities professors, undergraduate degree completions in the humanities began another ascent. The number of humanities degrees mounted for several years, quite vertically, paused briefly in the mid-1990s, and then began another ascent to the present. The proportions were not those of the golden age, and some other fields grew more rapidly, but the numbers hardly suggested an ongoing crisis.<sup>8</sup>

Some challenges to the humanities began, almost invisibly, to work themselves out in the 1990s. As faculty members hired in the 1960s and 1970s began to retire, positions slowly opened for graduate students with new perspectives and new backgrounds. Disciplines incorporated their skeptics, appointing people who specialized in theory or critical studies, cementing their place in the conversation. New programs attracted students by confronting injustices of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and political belief. Service learning and other kinds of engaged scholarship imparted an active cast to courses and bodies of scholarship. The earlier crisis of the humanities, in effect, became internalized and institutionalized.

The relative position of the humanities within colleges and universities stabilized in the late 1980s and has not changed appreciably in the last twenty years. The share of bachelor’s degree

7 See Menand, *Marketplace of Ideas*, 2 – 4.

8 Unless otherwise specified, the analysis of trends and patterns that follows is based on the Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org>.

completions in business still floats at least ten percentage points above the proportion of degrees bestowed by each of the other disciplines, and vocational programs still attract growing numbers of students. But the social sciences, life sciences, social services, and humanities each consistently confer about 10 – 15 percent of undergraduate degrees. The humanities occupy the middle of the pack on most measures of disciplinary health, from the ethnic and gender diversity of faculty and students to the salaries and degree of satisfaction of graduates.<sup>9</sup>

The humanities play an important role at every kind of institution. Approximately 40 percent of all undergraduate humanities degrees come from large research universities, where they account for about 15 percent of all bachelor's degrees. About a third of all degrees are awarded in the humanities in their longtime home, the liberal arts colleges. And the humanities occupy a central position in leading research universities as well, providing academic leadership, large enrollments, and popular majors. As a result of this presence across an array of institutions, the United States stands in the top third of the percentage of degrees awarded in the humanities and the arts internationally, ranking with Germany and Denmark.

Within this period of consolidation over the last two decades, traditional fields within the humanities have retained their strength. Even as new majors and programs have sprung up,

9 While the humanities have attracted a growing percentage of traditionally under-represented ethnic groups (14.4 percent in 2004, compared to 8.8 percent in 1992), more than the physical sciences or the arts, they still trail social science and business.

most students make disciplinary homes in familiar surroundings. English remains the dominant major, producing about a third of all bachelor's degrees in the humanities, followed by general humanities and liberal studies with 26 percent, and history with 18 percent.

Despite the stability implied in aggregate numbers, the humanities in the United States have of course changed deeply. While the proportion of English majors has remained relatively high and relatively constant, what it means to study English today is not what it meant in 1968 or even 1988. An English class now may well explore literature from Africa or India; it may focus on television, film, video games, or comic books; it may look much like a history course – which in turn may look much like an English course. The number of courses in humanities departments, too, has exploded over the last few decades as new subjects and new approaches proliferate.

The early twenty-first century offers an unforeseen opportunity for humanists, one born of crisis and the sudden discovery of large parts of the world by the American government and people in the wake of September 11, 2001. In what one group has called a “second Sputnik moment,” scholars not only of Islam, the Middle East, and Arabic, but of many places once considered exotic – and largely irrelevant – by many Americans now show themselves to be fascinating, complex, and important. Students flock to classes that offer insight into parts of the world that now seem to matter, turning to humanists for training and wisdom. The international component of the humanities, a fundamental and distinguishing feature of practice in the United States for the last half century, suddenly finds it-

self with an eager audience inside and outside the academy.<sup>10</sup>

The humanities, in both context and practice, are in a process of fusing and merging, of eclecticism and experimentation; every group, every genre, every period is fair game. Methods old and new cohabit and combine. Texts dismissed as old-fashioned in the heat of the theory wars prove to be interesting after all. Scattered seeds of inquiry, innovation, and collaboration planted in decades past are growing rapidly, their tendrils reaching far beyond the halls of the department, the school, the university, and the country.

New books in the humanities, like the classrooms where they are taught, combine disciplines and theoretical perspectives as a matter of course. Although many academic libraries no longer buy copies of university press publications, and the number of copies of any monograph has grown discouragingly low, university presses are experimenting with new audiences and new media. And the Humanities Indicators Prototype suggests that publications have not slowed in the humanities: the number of new humanities books is on the rise, in fact, and the only humanities category to see a decline in publication in the first five years of the new century was literary criticism, which declined only 2 percent.

Libraries, the laboratories for the humanities, have revolutionized themselves. Card catalogs have been banished, and sophisticated digital tools have taken their place. Scholars have grown accustomed to vast archi-

val and journal resources online, easily searchable and duplicable. Job seekers turn to professional organizations' email discussion groups and electronic advertisements as the resources of choice. Long, complex, and fruitful disciplinary conversations and debates take place online. None of these innovations has led to crisis, even though some humanists warned of the loss of standards and collegiality sure to result from the rise of new media. Librarians and their allies have led a remarkable transformation.

The humanities remain largely a solitary craft, inexpensive and undemanding in the larger institutional context. Scholars neither expect nor receive much funding, internal or external, though the digital humanities<sup>11</sup> have been quite successful in attracting institutional and foundation support. The humanities' lack of reliance on outside funding is not necessarily a weakness. The sciences, where faculty salaries as well as postdoctoral fellowships, graduate funding, and lab equipment depend on external funds, have seen steep drops in the rate of grants from proposals. The sciences live with a kind of pressure and precariousness most humanities disciplines cannot imagine.

The problems the humanities face stem, to some degree, from internal dynamics. Too many universities admit more doctoral candidates than they can support with fellowships, partly to provide teaching assistants for large classes of undergraduates. Hobbled by the burdens of teaching too much too soon, those graduate

10 On the Sputnik allusion, see "A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities," The National Language Conference, February 1, 2005, 1.

11 For more on the digital humanities, see James J. O'Donnell's essay in this issue of *Dædalus*.

students often take nearly a decade to finish dissertations that have little chance of being published. The oversupply of PhDs in the humanities, in turn, creates a surplus labor pool that drives down salaries and encourages schools to hire adjunct faculty. A growing number of humanists support themselves by working at several jobs simultaneously, making far too little money for their hard work. These patterns, hard to break yet undeniably destructive, have become addictive for many schools.

Recent decades have demonstrated that the humanities, whatever their objective situation, will always feel ill at ease in the world, always in some degree of crisis. By their very nature, the humanities are revisionist, unsettled. They have no choice but to challenge the knowledge, even wisdom, they inherit. No interpretation, however brilliant or apparently authoritative, can be the last word or the humanities die. This constant revolution means that the humanities can never rest. It means, too, that the humanities cannot provide what many people outside the academy crave: conclusive answers to complex questions, fixed lists of approved knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

The humanities are intrinsically inefficient. Humanists take so long to write their books and articles not because they are lazy, but because there are few economies of scale in the work of a solitary scholar. New technologies do not speed scholarly work appreciably, and may even slow it, offering an apparently endless supply of texts and interpretations

to consider. Dissertations in the humanities are not generated in laboratories or with senior coauthors who have access to leading journals and organizations; they are the hard-won products of isolated, often lonely, apprentice scholars, suddenly confronted with the task of writing an original book. It is hardly surprising that almost half never finishes.

For all of their eloquence, commitment, and passion, moreover, humanists will always have a difficult time explaining their value to skeptics. Everyone can imagine what one learns in business school, but what one learns in most humanities disciplines is less tangible. Even the most accurate accounting of what the humanities offer can sound abstract and distant to students and their parents. Sociologist Steven Brint's description of what universities value in the humanities is exactly right, but does not obviously translate into the requirements for a first job: "the capacities to understand logical relations and abstract languages, to make meaningful discriminations, to develop empathy, to appreciate the interplay between the particular and the general, to understand the rhetoric and structure of arguments, to perceive and evaluate context, and to develop skills in building evidence in support of a position."<sup>13</sup>

Accurate explanations of the humanities tell students and their parents things that seem counterintuitive: that there is no necessary connection between what one studies in college and what kind of professional school one attends or what work one may do over the course of life; that there is no a correlation between a college GPA and earnings afterward.

12 See Dominick La Capra, "What Is Essential to the Humanities," in *Do the Humanities Have to Be Useful?* ed. G. Peter Lepage, Carolyn (Biddy) Martin, and Mohsen Mostafavi (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2006), 76–77.

13 Brint, "The Rise of the 'Practical Arts,'" 242.



Even claims for general-skill acquisition turn out to be complicated. “There is no consistent evidence for a substantial net effect (say a 20 percent or more positive effect) of college instruction on oral communication skills, written communication skills, general reflective judgment, or intellectual flexibility,” Andrew Abbott, a sociologist of higher education, explained to an incoming class at the University of Chicago. An honest survey of the situation, Abbott emphasized, shows that “you were smart people when you got in here and you’re going to be smart people when you get out, as long as you use that intelligence for something – it doesn’t really matter what – while you are here.” Yet Abbott assured his young listeners that they would indeed get something out of studying the liberal arts at the University of Chicago: “the ability to make more and more complex, more and more profound and extensive, the meanings that we attach to events and phenomena.” Educated people are able to see their life’s experience in the broadest terms. They can draw on perspectives and comparisons that enrich understanding and provide larger bases for judgment.<sup>14</sup>

This is the kind of argument that students at the best schools across the United States hear at their orientations and their commencements. It is self-consciously modest, persuasive because it avoids hyperbole, soaring rhetoric, or elitist claims. And students get it: the humanities are doing well at the most selective schools. In fact, the more exclusive and expensive the college or university, by and large, the more es-

tablished the relative position of the humanities. Students come to those schools with the expectation that they will succeed no matter what they study, that the ticket for the first part of their journey to professional school or Wall Street has already been punched, that they owe it to themselves to study what they find fascinating and meaningful. And that turns out to be the entire range of the humanities. In all but one of the Ivy League schools and at almost all of the nation’s top liberal arts colleges, no business school even competes for the attention of the students.

If these trends continue, the humanities may become the exclusive property of those with especially large amounts of personal, cultural, or institutional confidence. The humanities bring profoundly useful gifts, but the chance to use those gifts in the course of a day’s work depends on their owner’s position in the world. For first-generation, immigrant, or working-class students, pre-vocational or vocational majors make more immediate sense, even though such majors may limit long-term flexibility and opportunity. To be a classics graduate of an elite school is to see many opportunities ahead; to be a classics major at a college or university where Wall Street firms do not recruit or where graduate schools are wary is to take a large gamble – one that many students, whatever their interests, do not feel they can take. One can hardly blame them. It should not be surprising that African American students, finally given a chance at college, major in business far more often than in the humanities.

**H**umanities disciplines do exactly what they claim: create a richer life. They open opportunities and equip people to embrace those opportunities. The humanities prepare people

14 Andrew Abbott, “Welcome [for the class of 2006] to the University of Chicago,” *The Aims of Education Address*, September 26, 2002; available at [http://www.ditext.com/abbott/abbott\\_aims.html](http://www.ditext.com/abbott/abbott_aims.html).

to be leaders, to see the largest contexts and consequences of things, to make subtle distinctions and create new experiences, to deal with ambiguity, novelty, and complexity. But young people without faith that they will have the opportunity to exercise those skills often avoid, and even resent, the humanities and the time and energy they consume.

Showing skeptical students what the humanities have to offer opens doors for them, professionally as well as intellectually and personally. Yet general distribution requirements, the long-established vehicles for introducing young people to the humanities, may not be the best way to demonstrate the power and beauty of the humanities. Setting up the humanities at the beginning of college like so many obstacles to climb over or around does not seem to instill a love of the humanities in students already dubious of the value of the courses. We may need to rethink how we weave humanities education into the college experience.

Fortunately, many colleagues and students beyond the humanities want what the humanities have to offer and have changed their own practice to make room. Science, Technology, and Society programs, for example, build bridges between engineering studies and the historical and cultural context in which engineers work. Medical humanities, too, have become a rapidly growing field, celebrating the ability of the humanities, as one program puts it, to provide “insight into the human condition, suffering, personhood, our responsibility to each other.” The humanities and the arts help “to develop and nurture skills of observation, analysis, empathy, and self-reflection – skills that are essential for humane medical care.” Courses in the medical humanities draw on cultural studies, women’s studies, and disabil-

ity studies, benefiting from and encouraging work at the boundaries of older disciplines. Medical students look to the humanities to help ground them in a larger understanding of the human.<sup>15</sup>

Humanities disciplines, ironically, have collaborated less with schools with which they have more in common: education, business, and law. That is partly because education and business schools have attracted plenty of majors on their own and must sustain focused curricula to meet professional accreditation. The situation is beginning to change in education, however, where funders and leaders emphasize that knowing a subject and knowing how to teach that subject are integrally related. Schools of arts and sciences are now working with schools of education to redefine and strengthen the connections between the two. Many exciting and broadening innovations in humanities scholarship have yet to penetrate high school standards, textbooks, and classrooms, so there is much work to do in the preparation and sustenance of teachers.<sup>16</sup>

Business schools and humanities departments, traditional rivals, have long been skeptical of one another. The humanities claim, correctly, that they prepare people for careers in business (where, in fact, a very large percentage go after college) with broad

15 Mission Statement, Medical Humanities Program at NYU, available at <http://medhum.med.nyu.edu/index.html>; Therese Jones and Abraham Verghese, “On Becoming a Humanities Curriculum,” *Academic Medicine* 78 (2003): 1010 – 1014.

16 See Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 281 – 309.

skills in thinking and writing; business schools, their confidence hardly shaken, incorporate what they believe might be useful in the humanities, in courses on ethics or leadership, and seem content to leave the rest to general education requirements. Law sustains its own rich traditions of rhetoric, textual analysis, and scholarship and allows the barrier between undergraduates and professional schools to protect itself. As a result of these cultural and institutional obstacles, the great potential for collaboration among humanists and their colleagues in their own universities is, by and large, untapped.

Around the borders of the university, however, interest in the humanities flourishes. Participation in adult education humanities courses is steadily growing, from 2 million in 2001 to 3.3 million in 2005. Highly motivated adult students fill classes of all kinds, from community colleges to the most elite schools, eager to seize what they only glimpsed, did not understand fully, or missed entirely as nineteen year olds. The Osher Foundation has created over a hundred institutes for lifelong learning, in every state of the country, dedicated to “learning for the joy of learning” for people over fifty-five years of age.

The aptly named Teaching Company, founded in 1990, now offers more than 250 courses, most of them in the humanities and most of them taught by professors prominent in their disciplines. “Whether they’re commuting to work or hammering out miles on the treadmill, people have made these digital professors part of the fabric of their lives,” the *Christian Science Monitor* observes. The courses are bought by “multitasking baby boomers who drive to work wanting to know if Hitler could have been stopped if the world had

acted sooner. They are doctors and accountants who want to stretch themselves to relearn the Greek classics. And they are families at the dinner table, listening together in a tradition that has made the professors, well, part of the family.” Faculty who teach these classes become humanist celebrities.<sup>17</sup>

History, the most accessible of the humanities thanks to its narrative tradition, has even generated its own television empire. Beginning in 1995 as a single channel, History, now with a variety of specialized channels, reaches more than 91 million homes in the United States. The offerings have also expanded around the world, available in over 130 countries and more than 230 million TV households. The shows on History, as on public television, the Discovery Channel, and elsewhere, draw liberally from the ranks of academic historians, either as advisers or as on-screen presences, and reflect the broadened range of subjects embraced by professional historians over the last half century.<sup>18</sup>

New digital media open opportunities for humanists inconceivable during the golden age. Websites, lectures, and videos on popular humanities subjects attract millions of visitors from all over the world and all kinds of backgrounds. Amazon makes scholarly books visible and available in ways impossible only a decade ago. Humanists enjoy a range of venues and audiences unimaginable to those who wrote for a few small magazines in the celebrated heyday of public intellectuals. Google Research provides

17 *Christian Science Monitor*, January 28, 2003.

18 “Making History with History”: <http://www.reveries.com/reverb/media/scheff/index.html>; <http://www.aetninternational.com/news.jsp?id=17679909>.

popular access to scholarship previously locked away in research libraries. The digital humanities offer the opportunity, even the obligation, to rethink the entire record of the human experience for vastly larger audiences, to invent new forms of scholarship. And we have barely begun that work.

In a sense, then, the humanities have come full circle. They began with hopes and claims of enriching and changing lives and, whatever the challenges they faced, never abandoned that sense of mission. Humanities disciplines are now both more capacious and more modest than they were before the golden age. Neither “cultural literacy,” as a kind of storing up of cultural capital, nor the cultivation of “critical thinking skills,” with the humanities serving as a kind of mental sandbox, are adequate purposes. Both divide substance from method, content from technique. The humanities are fascinating and useful precisely because they are self-aware: they put both the object of analysis and the method of analysis in play.

Vital humanities, it turns out, are not endangered by theory or an expanded canon or political correctness – or by great books, an interest in European culture, or paying attention to sequence, detail, and context. Both sides of the culture wars pursued, in different ways, the same unlikely object: ways to make humanities matter in the world. In their own ways, perhaps somewhat to their surprise, both have succeeded.

The threat to the humanities may not lie where we have been looking for it, in declining possibilities within institutions of higher learning. The humanities are not fading away within the academy. Instead, the humanities should worry about becoming the preserve of an exclusive class. Precisely because the hu-

manities prepare people to lead expansive and thoughtful lives, they must find ways to connect with people of all kinds, of all backgrounds, ages, and aspirations. The humanities cannot afford to be smug or cautious, elitist or timid. They must put themselves in play, at risk, in the world. They must find ways to combine their traditional strengths, tried and even strengthened by decades of trial, with new opportunities.

Despite, or perhaps because of, their relentless self-critique, the humanities remain a crucial part of American higher education and public life. When all is said and done, humanists know things that other people want and need to know. The humanities offer at least a chance of understanding ourselves better – and any such understanding will always be hard-won, precious, and necessary.

Francis Oakley

*The humanities in liberal arts colleges:  
another instance of collegiate exceptionalism?*

Because liberal arts colleges are “in certain respects more diverse than any other type of higher education institution,”<sup>1</sup> and because their nature, history, generally shared characteristics, even their very number, are so often a matter of contention, I have learned over the years the wisdom, when attempting to say something about them, of beginning with a preliminary exercise in intellectual throat-clearing. Hence I offer these rather basic introductory stipulations.

The first concerns the nature of such colleges and the history of the category of institutions to which they belong.

Some of our liberal arts colleges began their careers as secondary schools of one sort or another (Williams College is one such example), and it is not only for Europeans that the term “college” has tended willy-nilly to evoke the image of an institution of secondary education. “The college will disappear, in fact, if not in name,” David Starr Jordan, founding president of Stanford University, confidently predicted a century ago. “The best,” he added, “will become universities, the others will *return* to their place as academies” – return, that is, to being advanced-level secondary schools.<sup>2</sup>

But even when they did in fact originate as schools, once they became *colleges* such institutions did not trace their

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1 Alexander W. Astin, “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” *Dædalus* 128 (1) (Winter 1999): 78. For their assistance in my preparation of this paper, I wish to acknowledge with gratitude my indebtedness to the following colleagues at Williams for access to and help with Williams’ enrollment statistics and two sets of comparative institutional data: Chris Winters, director of institutional research, Office of the Provost; Keith C. Finan, associate provost; and Charles R. Toomajian, Jr., associate dean of the College and registrar.

2 Quoted in Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 68, 443.

lineage back to any sort of academy for secondary education. Their institutional forebears, instead, were the constituent colleges of Oxford and Cambridge and, more precisely, beyond them the single-college universities that had appeared in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Spain, Scotland, and Ireland. Those institutions, unlike the Oxbridge (or, for that matter, the medieval Parisian) colleges, though still colleges were also something different in that they were granted the crucial and distinctive prerogative attached to university status: namely, that of granting degrees. Sigüenza in Spain, accorded that prerogative in 1489, was a classic example. So, too, later on, was Trinity College, Dublin – or Dublin University, as it was sometimes called, or, better, and with greater legal and institutional precision, the University of Trinity College, Dublin.<sup>3</sup>

The sharp distinction between “college” and “university” that people like President Jordan instinctively advanced, and that we today all too often assume, was something, in fact, of a late-nineteenth-century American innovation. It was spawned by the enormous contemporary admiration for the German research university and by the concomitant attempt at places like Johns Hopkins, Clark, the Catholic University of America, Cornell, Chicago, and Stanford to replicate its particular characteristics on American soil. That distinction has not always been a helpful one. It has

tended to promote the idea that the free-standing, residential liberal arts college is something *less* than the modern American university rather than something *other* than that. And it has encouraged the colleges themselves to permit others to define them in terms of what they lack (great research libraries and laboratories, graduate and professional schools, for example) rather than in terms of what they proudly possess: a firm, unwavering, and undistracted commitment to bringing to the education of *undergraduates* the full resources proper to a small university. For that, in effect, is what they are: small college-universities devoted exclusively (or almost exclusively) to the teaching of undergraduates. And that fact is directly pertinent to the nature of the contribution they make to the well-being of the humanities in American higher education.

The second stipulation concerns the matter of institutional diversity, even within the traditional category of liberal arts colleges. For that factor shapes, conditions, and qualifies the nature of the collegiate contribution to the overall health of humanistic studies. The definition of the American college given above, while it emphasizes undergraduate teaching, says nothing about what, precisely, is being taught. In particular, it says nothing about the liberal arts (arts and sciences) let alone the humanities – and for very good reason. It turns out that many of the colleges traditionally labeled or self-styled as liberal arts colleges award less than half of their degrees in liberal arts/arts and sciences (as opposed to vocational or preprofessional subjects). These are the institutions now categorized in the *Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education* (2000 edition) as Bac-

3 Francis Oakley, *Community of Learning: The American College and the Liberal Arts Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 20–21. Similarly, the constituent colleges of the University of Toronto, originally independent, freestanding universities in their own right and still intent on protecting their right to confer certain degrees, call themselves the University of Victoria College, the University of St. Michael's College, and so on.

calaureate Colleges – General. (That category overlaps with or bears a reasonably close relation to the category designated in earlier editions either as Liberal Arts II or as Baccalaureate Colleges II.<sup>4</sup>) And given the fact that the bulk of their students are not majoring in liberal arts subjects, the Baccalaureate Colleges – General designation more accurately describes the type of education in which these colleges are predominantly engaged than does any sort of collegiate label invoking the liberal arts.

Nor does that particular manifestation of diversity within the group of institutions lumped together traditionally as liberal arts colleges exhaust their variety. Diversity among them, in fact, extends further and well beyond the normal distinctions between private and publicly controlled, single-sex and coeducational, non-sectarian and religiously affiliated, historically black institutions and the rest. It reflects also differences in the degree of racial and ethnic diversity in their student bodies, differences in curricular structure and favored pedagogic mode, differences in the degree to which their faculties are committed to and actually engaged in scholarly research and writing, and differences in the level of academic preparation characteristic of the students they admit. This last differential is linked further with markedly varying levels of selectivity in the admissions process, as well as with other differences flowing from the highly un-

even distribution of financial resources across the entire universe of colleges.

Of the several hundred institutions traditionally viewed as constituting the universe of liberal arts colleges, fewer than fifty fall into the favored group of so-called “medallion institutions,” which regularly attract a surplus of well-qualified applicants and have no difficulty at all in peopling their freshman classes with students who are academically well-prepared. By far the larger group of colleges, however, finds itself hard-pressed to fill classes with students who are not only adequately qualified but also capable of paying the standard tuition rates. Such institutions operate, in effect, an open (or quasi-open) admissions system and are condemned, even then, to an annual exercise of juggling anxiously the bleak equations of tuition pricing and tuition discounting.<sup>5</sup> Even within the highly favored medallion group, the colleges truly able to operate in unqualified fashion on the basis of *both* need-blind admission and need-based financial aid amount to no more than a handful. Taking the collegiate sector as a whole, it is a dramatic testimony to the unevenness in the financial resources at their disposal that the most affluent of the colleges are able to spend no less than five times as

4 *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 2000 edition (Menlo Park, Calif.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2001), 1–2 (Category Definitions) and 6 (Table 2). Cf. *A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 1994 edition (Princeton, N.J.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1994), xi and xiv (Tables 1 and 4) and xix (Category Definitions).

5 For an instructive glimpse into the marked disparities in the financial resources of institutions in the collegiate sector, see Lucie Lapovsky, “The Economic Challenges of Liberal Arts Colleges”; Roger T. Kaufman, “Discounts and Spending at the Top Liberal Arts Colleges”; and Michael S. McPherson, “Response”: all in *Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2005), 50–86. Cf. Michael S. McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro, “The Future Economic Challenges for the Liberal Arts Colleges,” *Dædalus* 128 (1) (Winter 1999).

much per student as can their less well-endowed collegiate brethren.<sup>6</sup>

The third stipulation, if we are to speak intelligibly about our liberal arts colleges and the place the humanities enjoy within them, is that we have to be clear at the outset, not only about matters pertaining to their nature, history, and diversity, but also, and more fundamentally, about their very number. In this respect, the story across the past half century has been one of unquestionable decline. As recently as the mid-1950s the institutions traditionally classified (or self-styled) as liberal arts colleges constituted about 40 percent of the total number of institutions of higher education. By the early 1970s, however, they had come to account for no more than a quarter of all institutions. Over the subsequent years the shrinkage has continued, if at a slower pace, and the decline involved has not simply been proportionate to the size overall of the higher educational institutional universe. Between 1967 and 1990, in fact, some 167 private four-year colleges ceased to exist, whether by merger with other institutions or by outright closure.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the predominance at many of those remaining of vocational and preprofessional curricular offerings suggested the propriety (indeed, the necessity) of whittling down still further the number of those that could lay undeniable claim to the title of “liberal arts college.”

Over a decade ago, David Breneman, an expert in educational policy and eco-

6 Astin, “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” 28.

7 Hugh Hawkins, “The Making of the Liberal Arts College Identity,” *Dædalus* 128 (1) (Winter 1999): 15–16, 21.

nomics, pointed out that in terms of their prevailing curricular focus a majority of the 637 colleges listed in the 1994 Carnegie Classifications did not really appear to be liberal arts colleges at all.<sup>8</sup> The earnest proclamation by many such a college of a liberal arts educational mission did not appear to be matched by the curricular realities on the ground, which turned out instead to be predominantly vocational or preprofessional.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Breneman found that if one applied the admittedly “weak criterion constituted by the awarding of at least 40 percent of their degrees in liberal arts subjects,” the total universe of private liberal arts colleges had to be more than halved, thereby reducing the total to a mere 212.

While the tendency at the time was to integrate that sobering finding into yet another of the declension narratives of which academics seem instinctively to be so fond, it has since been pointed out that the tilt in the collegiate sector toward a focus on professional preparation long predated our recent era of educational discontent. At Union College in New York State it was evident in curricular changes introduced as early as 1827.<sup>10</sup>

8 David W. Breneman, “Are We Losing Our Liberal Arts Colleges?” *College Board Review* 156 (Summer 1990): 16–21, 29; David W. Breneman, *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), especially chap. 1, 1–19, and Appendix A, 138–161.

9 Michael Delucchi, “‘Liberal Arts’ Colleges and the Myth of Uniqueness,” *Journal of Higher Education* 67 (1997): 414–424, where he notes (at 414–415) that “under such changing circumstances, the retention of a liberal arts claim in the academic mission statements of these colleges becomes inconsistent with their professional curriculum.”

10 Thus Christina Elliott Sorum, “‘Vortex, Clouds, and Tongue’: New Problems in the



And “except for the altogether atypical period from 1956 – 1970” many of the institutions which came during that period to be classified as Liberal Arts II colleges had “never awarded a large percentage of liberal arts degrees.” Of the “317 institutions that did not meet Breneman’s criterion in 1987” and came to be reclassified, therefore, as “small professional colleges,” it turns out that at least 134 would not have met that criterion already in 1956.<sup>11</sup>

The shift of liberal arts colleges in the direction of vocational or preprofessional training, then, was neither as sudden nor as dramatic as Breneman supposed. But that notwithstanding, it still remains appropriate to distinguish within the collegiate universe those institutions at which the study of liberal arts subjects predominates from those at which it does not. And that is precisely what the 2000 edition of the *Carnegie Classification* does. Setting as its criterion for inclusion in the group to be designated by deployment of the liberal arts label the awarding of at least 50 percent of a college’s baccalaureate degrees in liberal arts fields, and, unlike Breneman, including in its totals publicly controlled colleges as well as private, that edition came up with a total of 228 Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts, assigning the balance of 321 to its Baccalaureate Colleges – General category, for an overall collegiate total of 549.<sup>12</sup> These are the

figures adopted by the ongoing Humanities Indicators Prototype sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences,<sup>13</sup> and they are the ones with which we will be operating in what follows. Accept those figures and we must now take the Baccalaureate Colleges (old Liberal Arts I and II sectors) to amount to somewhat less than 15 percent of all American institutions of higher education. As for enrollments, whereas in the mid-1950s about 25 percent of American students attended liberal arts colleges (a figure dropping to no more than 8 percent by the early 1970s), by 2000 that figure came in at 6.1 percent. And if one limits oneself more precisely to the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts sector of 228 colleges, one has to remember that one is focusing on a group of institutions that constitutes no more than 5.8 percent of the entire higher educational institutional universe and enrolls no more than 2.5 percent of the American student population.<sup>14</sup>

All of that said, and still keeping an eye on the importance of the distinc-

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of Baccalaureate – Associate, it placed in the collegiate category overall, for a total of 606, an additional 57 colleges at which baccalaureate degrees accounted for at least 20 percent of undergraduate degrees, but at which “the majority of conferrals are below the baccalaureate level (associate’s degrees and certificates)” ; see Categories Definition, 1.

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Humanities,” *Dædalus* 128 (1) (Winter 1999): 241.

11 See Joan Gilbert, “The Liberal Arts College – Is It Really an Endangered Species?” *Change* 27 (1995): 41 – 42; italics mine.

12 *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 2000 edition, 6 and 20, Tables 2 and 5. Introducing the new subcategory

13 For the background to this project, see the essays by Robert M. Solow, Francis Oakley, Phyllis Franklin, John D’Arms, and Calvin C. Jones collected in *Making the Humanities Count: The Importance of Data* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2002).

14 *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 2000 edition, 6, 20 – 21, and Tables 2, 5, and 6.

tion to be drawn between Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts and Baccalaureate Colleges – General, we may now ask what sort of judgment (or judgments) can properly be passed on the state of the humanities in the collegiate sector, on the distinctive achievements of that sector, on the type of example it sets, and on the contribution that example might potentially make to the overall vibrancy of American higher education.

Given the fact that faculty attitudes and commitments, educational programs and practices, and overall intellectual atmosphere characteristic of these colleges clearly shape everything that goes on within them, I will dwell first on those characteristics in general before narrowing the focus to the position occupied by the humanistic disciplines in particular. The more so in that of recent years much attention has been devoted to those characteristics, especially by research groups centered on the University of California, Los Angeles; Indiana University; and the University of Iowa. And the picture that has emerged from the research conducted is one of quite marked exceptionalism in more than one dimension of collegiate life.

So far as the faculties of these colleges are concerned (Baccalaureate Colleges – General as well as Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts), the presence of part-time and adjunct appointments is less prominent than in any other sector of higher education.<sup>15</sup> Because of that,

15 Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 94. So far as American higher education as a whole is concerned, there is some evidence to suggest that the trend toward employing part-time, adjunct, and non-tenure-track faculty may be “especially pronounced in the humanities,” with “the proportion of part-time faculty . . . [being] . . . especially high in English, history, [and] modern languages.” See James C. Hearn

and with no teaching cadre of graduate students readily at hand, the vast bulk of the teaching in all subject areas, the humanities not excluded, is done by full-time faculty members, the great majority of them tenure-track or tenured. And, so far as the percentage of their time committed to teaching as opposed to research, consulting, and other pertinent activities goes, those faculty are surpassed only by faculty teaching at the two-year colleges.<sup>16</sup> Among those faculty, moreover, those who hold appointments at the leading highly selective and better-endowed colleges in the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts sector appear also to have achieved some sort of optimal balance between teaching and scholarship. In an intriguing study, which Alexander Astin and Mitchell Chang, professors of higher education, published in 1995, they found that the top eleven institutions that ranked highly on *both* research and student orientation were all of them private, highly selective colleges from that sector.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, despite salary levels that have long fallen, at least in aggre-

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and Alexander V. Gorbonov, “Funding the Core: Understanding the Financial Contexts of Academic Departments in the Humanities,” in *Tracking Changes in the Humanities: Essays on Finance and Education*, ed. Malcolm Richardson (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2005), 13.

16 Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 94 – 96.

17 Alexander W. Astin and Mitchell J. Chang, “Colleges that Emphasize Research and Teaching: Can You Have Your Cake and Eat it Too?” *Change* 27 (1995): 45 – 49. Later on Astin noted that “what was especially intriguing about this study was that it had, in effect, ‘rediscovered’ the selective liberal arts college by conducting a purely statistical search for institutions that are best able to emphasize both teaching and research”; “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” 91. For the

gate, below those prevailing in most other sectors in American higher education (the two-year colleges at times not excepted),<sup>18</sup> data from the last (1989) of the faculty surveys conducted over the years by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education indicate that faculty teaching in the collegiate sector were prominent among those who were at the highest end of the institutional loyalty and commitment scale, who felt least “trapped in a profession with limited opportunity for advancement,” and who evinced accordingly the greatest enthusiasm about their work. Those data also revealed the collegiate sector to be the one possessed of the highest measure of agreement about the standards of good scholarship and the highest degree of commitment to the importance of institutional service, student advising, and the delivery, evaluation, and rewarding of effective teaching.<sup>19</sup>

All of this, of course, serves to underpin the forceful claims often made for

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larger context in which this issue should be understood, see Francis Oakley, *Scholarship and Teaching: A Matter of Mutual Support* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1996).

18 Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 94–96. Also Francis Oakley, “The Elusive Academic Profession: Complexity and Change,” *Dædalus* 126 (4) (Fall 1997): 49–50.

19 The results of the 1989 survey are tabulated in Ernest J. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities for the Professoriate* (Princeton, N.J.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990), Appendix A, Tables A-3, A-6–7, A-11–13, A-18, A-23, A-32, A-35, A-37, A-39–40. In a rather hands-on study (involving some direct fieldwork), which Howard R. Bowen and Jack H. Schuster conducted in the mid-1980s and at the low point in the trajectory both of academic salaries and academic morale (*American Professors: A National Resource Imperiled* [New York and Oxford: Ox-

the very positive “educational outcomes” delivered by these colleges. At its best, it has been said, the liberal arts college – small, residential, comparatively intimate in scale, relying for its teaching on fully qualified and committed faculty – “remains almost a unique embodiment of a certain ideal of educational excellence.”<sup>20</sup> And that claim is surely warranted. Commentators on these colleges have remarked on the importance attached to their single-minded focus on the education of undergraduates; on the enhanced measure in which their students actually complete bachelor’s degrees; on the unusual strength of their orientation to student needs; on the extent to which their students are themselves “more satisfied with the faculty, the quality of teaching, and the general education program” than are students attending other types of institution; on their incorporation of “a wide range of exemplary educational practices in their educational programs”; and on their ability to “produce a pattern of consistently positive student outcomes not found in any other type of American higher education institution.”<sup>21</sup> Those outcomes do, indeed, appear to be very impressive, none perhaps more impres-

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ford University Press, 1986], 140), they had similarly found excellent conditions for work and continuing high faculty morale on the highly selective Liberal Arts I campuses they had visited. The situation at the Liberal Arts II campuses in their sample was apparently less satisfactory.

20 McPherson and Schapiro, “The Future Economic Challenges for the Liberal Arts Colleges,” 73.

21 See in general the essays gathered together in volume 128, number 1 (Winter 1999) of *Dædalus* on Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges, especially, and in order of citation, McPherson and Schapiro,

sive (if still surprising to some) than the well-attested collegiate record of being “twice as productive as the average institution in training” those who go on to take PhDs in the natural sciences. That record presupposes, of course, their success, the nationwide decline in student interest in the sciences notwithstanding, both in attracting students who are interested in the natural sciences and graduating them as science majors. Further than that, and focusing especially on those scientific racehorses who have been honored by election into membership of the National Academy of Sciences, it would appear that liberal arts college graduates not only go on to obtain PhDs in disproportionate numbers but also succeed in excelling in their respective fields of research at a rate at least two times greater than bachelor’s degree recipients in general.<sup>22</sup>

Among those involved in educational research, however, inferences made

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“The Future Economic Challenges for the Liberal Arts Colleges”; Astin, “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” 83, 77; Susan C. Bourque, “Reassessing Research: Liberal Arts Colleges and the Social Sciences,” 265, where she notes that “with [the 1998] data weighted for size of institution,” eight of the leading ten institutions producing people who go on to PhDs in the social sciences are liberal arts colleges; and Thomas R. Cech, “Science at Liberal Arts Colleges: A Better Education?” See also Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 91–93; Astin and Chang, “Colleges that Emphasize Research and Teaching”; and Richard Ekman, “Selective and Non-Selective Alike: An Argument for the Superior Educational Effectiveness of Smaller Liberal Arts Colleges,” in *Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education*, 151–171.

22 Thus Cech, “Science at Liberal Arts Colleges”; Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 91–93. Something roughly comparable appears to be the case with the social sciences, too. Thus

from alumni outcomes to the quality of the undergraduate education received at college tend to be greeted with a robust measure of skepticism. “The major problem with making inferences about the quality of undergraduate education from differences in the capabilities or accomplishments of alumni,” Ernest Pascarella, professor of higher education, points out, is “that one has to assume that all institutions start with the same level of students.” And, of course, they do not, even when they belong to the same higher educational sector. “Far and away the best predictors” of “educational outcomes” are the characteristics of the individual student when he or she enters college. To put it somewhat brutally, “input” turns out to be “the best predictor of output” – so much so that “by far the best predictor of students’ Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores when they graduate from college is their ACT/SAT scores when they enter college.”<sup>23</sup>

Hence the importance, so far as the overall quality of the education provided by our liberal arts colleges is concerned and, accordingly, the quality of the instruction they provide in the humanistic disciplines, of the picture that has emerged from the growing body of research pursued of recent years (along with a broad array of collaborators) by such leading scholars in the field of high-

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Bourque, in “Reassessing Research,” using the 1998 Higher Education Data Service figures on the baccalaureate origin of those who go on to receive PhDs in the social sciences, notes (at 265) that “with data *weighted for size of institution*,” eight of the leading ten institutions producing those PhD candidates are liberal arts colleges; italics mine.

23 Ernest T. Pascarella, “Identifying Excellence in Undergraduate Education,” *Change* 33 (3) (2001): 19–20.

er education as Pascarella himself, Alexander W. Astin, and George D. Kuh. What they have done in that impressive body of work is to shift the focus of attention helpfully, when it comes to indices of educational excellence, both from institutional resources and external reputation and also from alumni accomplishments, to the presence within the institutions concerned of those educational practices and processes that have been shown empirically elsewhere to be “significantly and positively linked to desired aspects of cognitive and non-cognitive growth during college.”<sup>24</sup> The focus, that is to say, is now directly on what students experience at college or university, and on the effort the institution itself makes to “maximize good [educational] practices and enhance students’ academic and social engagement or effort.”<sup>25</sup> Summing up in 2005 the growing body of research findings on the topic, drawing on the data assembled by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) from some 730 four-year universities and colleges and from more than 430,000 students, and focusing specifically on the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts sector, George Kuh concluded that “students at liberal arts colleges generally are more engaged across the board in effective educational

24 Ernest T. Pascarella et al., “Do Liberal Arts Colleges Really Foster Good Practices in Undergraduate Education?” *Journal of College Student Development* 45 (1) (2004): 58. Cf. Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993).

25 For example, “The focus and quality of teaching received, interactions with peers and faculty, writing experiences, involvement in coursework, level of academic and social engagement and the like”; thus Pascarella, “Identifying Excellence in Undergraduate Education,” 20–21.

practices than their counterparts at other types of institutions.” In relation to the five NSSE benchmarks as well as to other measures, “liberal arts colleges,” he reports, “score consistently higher than any other type of institution.” And those favorable results are “net of” (that is, irrespective of or controlled for) such distinguishing student characteristics as age and gender and such distinguishing institutional features as size, residential nature, and selectivity in admissions.<sup>26</sup> This last is particularly important in that it strongly suggests that “output” may not altogether be a function of “input” but may reflect also the supportive nature of the intellectual atmosphere prevailing at such colleges, as well as the range of their curricular offerings and the educational programs and practices characteristic of them. So that, “in many respects ... [and] ... in terms of effective educational practice,” or so Kuh claims, “liberal arts colleges set the bar for American higher education.”<sup>27</sup>

Insofar as this says something very positive about the general quality of the ed-

26 George D. Kuh, “Built to Engage: Liberal Arts Colleges and Effective Educational Practice,” in *Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education*, 124–125. NSSE grouped “questions about student and institutional performance into five clusters or benchmarks of effective educational practice”: (i) academic challenge; (ii) active and collaborative learning; (iii) student-faculty interaction; (iv) enriching intellectual experience; and (v) supportive campus environment. For further details on these benchmarks and for scores on them calibrated by the Carnegie institutional classification, see Appendices A and B, 141–145. Cf. George D. Kuh, “What We’re Relearning about Student Engagement from NSSE: Benchmarks for Effective Educational Practices,” *Change* 35 (2) 2003: 24–37.

27 Kuh, “Built to Engage.”

ucation these colleges provide, it should say something very positive also about the quality of the education they provide in the humanistic disciplines – to the extent, of course, that they focus their institutional resources on instruction in humanistic disciplines, and to the extent to which their students choose to avail themselves of the instruction on offer in those subject areas. Here a particular point that Astin makes is especially pertinent. In relation to the baccalaureate colleges in general and the highly selective liberal arts group in particular, he identifies the very strength of what he calls their “humanities orientation” as a component crucial to the prevalence on their campuses of good educational practices. By humanities orientation he has in mind (variously) such things as the “frequent use of interdisciplinary and humanities courses (especially history and foreign languages),” the offering (or strength of) general education courses, the importance attached to the teaching of “the classics of Western civilization,” the use of essay examinations, the practice of seeing written work through multiple drafts, and so on.<sup>28</sup>

The strength of that humanities orientation is particularly evident in the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts group of some 228 institutions. While at those colleges students in a particular semester may occasionally be denied entry into one or other humanities course because of temporary overcrowding, one does not encounter in this institutional grouping the sort of routine inability to

meet student demand for such courses that has become depressingly evident at some of our large state universities over the past decade and more. (At the University of Washington, for example, such a routine incapacity to meet demand has led to a pattern of course denials in the humanities reaching occasionally as high as 25 percent and fluctuating on a continuing basis in the neighborhood of 15 – 20 percent.<sup>29</sup>) And that, in turn, reflects the fact that commitment to the humanistic disciplines evidenced by the presence of proportionately larger cohorts of faculty in those disciplines appears to bulk larger in the collegiate (Liberal Arts) group than in any other institutional sector.

Taking American higher education as a whole, faculty in the humanistic disciplines have constituted over at least the past ten years no more than 14 percent of the entire faculty universe, with 29 percent of that group concentrated in the Doctoral – Research University sector, and 11 percent in the entire collegiate sector (that is, embracing both Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts and Baccalaureate Colleges – General). But if one shifts the angle of approach and inquires into the distribution of faculty across fields *within* the institutional sectors in question, the picture changes significantly. One finds then that humanities faculty amount to no more than 11.5 percent in the overall Doctoral – Research University sector but constitute 20 percent in the overall

28 Astin, “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” 86, 91 – 92, where (at 86) he attributes the excellent performance of students on the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) largely “to the strong humanities orientation at these institutions.” Cf. Astin, *What Matters in College*, 45.

29 Donald C. Summers, “Prospects for the Humanities as Public Universities Privatize their Finances,” in *Tracking Changes in the Humanities*, ed. Richardson, 68 – 71 and Figure 11. During the same period (1994 – 2003) the rate of course denials in the social sciences actually exceeded the rate in the humanities, while in the natural sciences and professional schools it often fell short of 10 percent.

Baccalaureate sector, outpacing in the latter sector both natural and social scientists (at 18.2 and 12.6 percent, respectively), and easily surpassing the percentages of humanities faculty in each of the other Carnegie-defined sectors.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, the fledgling Humanities Indicators Prototype, from which I draw these percentages, does not in this connection break down either the overall Doctoral – Research University sector or the overall Baccalaureate Colleges sector into its pertinent subdivisions. But I would speculate, and with considerable confidence, that the aggregate percentage of humanities faculty at the 228 colleges that make up the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts group far surpasses the 20 percent recorded for the entire Baccalaureate Colleges sector. Certainly, figures for faculty collected from a representative sample group of leading research universities and highly selective liberal arts colleges (over thirty institutions in all) reveal that the percentage of humanities faculty at the universities in question reaches the 20 percent recorded for the Baccalaureate sector overall, while the percentage for the colleges in the sample exceeded 40 percent.<sup>31</sup>

30 Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=III-10a.jpg&o=hrcoIIID.aspx\\_\\_topIII10](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=III-10a.jpg&o=hrcoIIID.aspx__topIII10): Part III. *Figure III-10a: Distribution of Postsecondary Faculty across Academic Fields, by Type of Educational Institution, 2004*, and [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=III-11a.jpg&o=hrcoIIID.aspx\\_\\_topIII11](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=III-11a.jpg&o=hrcoIIID.aspx__topIII11): *Figure III-11a: Full-Time Faculty as a Percentage of All Postsecondary Faculty, by Primary Teaching Field, 1993 – 2004* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008).

31 For these figures I must content myself with referring to correspondence with Dr. Keith Finan, associate provost, Williams College.

If, turning now to the student side of the equation and the degree to which undergraduates are enrolling in the humanities courses that these faculty offer, we find ourselves, unfortunately, still bereft of stable, reliable, and comprehensive statistical data.<sup>32</sup> Instead, we have to content ourselves with taking patterns of successful majoring as an admittedly rough proxy for what such data might reveal. In this respect, the American Academy's Humanities Indicators Prototype (hewing to the 2000 *Carnegie Classification*) provides for the year 2004 some very helpful data revelatory of the distribution across our institutions of higher education of baccalaureate degrees completed in the humanities.<sup>33</sup> And the picture that emerges, while not counterintuitive, is still quite striking. Not surprisingly, given the number of undergraduates they enroll, the institutions in the Doctoral – Research and Master's Colleges and Universities sectors account, respectively, for 49 and 34 percent of the humanities degrees awarded, for a total of 83 percent. The Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts and Baccalaureate Colleges – General, on the other hand, account, respectively, for 12 and 5 percent of the humanities degrees awarded, for a combined total of no more than 17 percent (this exclusive of the 0.3 percent of such degrees awarded by the small, new category now designated as Baccalaureate – Associate).

32 Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoIIA.aspx>: Part II. *Section A: Undergraduate Education, Introduction*.

33 Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=II-3a.jpg&o=hrcoIIA.aspx\\_\\_topII3](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=II-3a.jpg&o=hrcoIIA.aspx__topII3): Part II. *Figure II-3a: Distribution of Humanities Bachelor's Degree Completions among Types of Awarding Institution, 2004*.

By itself, admittedly, that does not tell us all that much. But if one folds into the analysis the distribution of the student population in general across the sectors in question the picture becomes more interesting. The Doctoral – Research and Master’s sectors enroll 28.1 and 21.4 percent, respectively, of the number of those studying for undergraduate or graduate degrees in the entire universe of American higher education, for a combined total of 49.5 percent. Though strongly tilted, of course, toward undergraduates, the comparable figures for Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts and Baccalaureate Colleges – General are 2.5 and 3.6 percent, respectively, for a combined total of 6.1 percent. Thus, when it comes to graduating students with baccalaureate degrees in the humanities, it is clear, when one takes overall enrollment patterns into account, that the Baccalaureate Colleges sector in general (and its Liberal Arts subsector in particular), in proportion to the size and distribution of the student population overall, are certainly outpacing the other sectors.<sup>34</sup>

If, however, one’s concern lies more precisely with the importance of the place occupied by the humanities in the institutions falling into each of the Carnegie categories (and especially the collegiate Liberal Arts subsector), then

the more significant, finely calibrated, and revealing picture is the one that emerges if we use the data now available for “Humanities Bachelor’s Degree Completions as a Percentage of All Bachelor’s Degree Completions, by Type of Awarding Institution.”<sup>35</sup> Doing so, we find that a significant divide opens up within the ranks both of the Doctoral – Research universities overall and, even more so, of the Baccalaureate Colleges taken as a whole (though, again, excluding the tiny Baccalaureate – Associate subsector). Thus, in this respect the second tier of research universities (Doctoral – Research Intensive) comes in with a figure of 12 percent, next to the bottom of the pack, while the top-tier research universities, with a figure of 15 percent, next to the top. More strikingly, the old Liberal Arts II group of colleges (now Baccalaureate Colleges – General), with a figure of 10 percent, comes in at the very bottom. Their Liberal Arts counterpart in the Baccalaureate sector, on the other hand, with a figure of no less than 31 percent – more than twice as high as any other sector – comes in easily at the top.

Insofar then as we are concerned with the prominence of the humanistic disci-

34 For overall enrollment patterns, see *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 2000 edition, 21, Table 6; and for humanities degrees completed, Humanities Indicators Prototype, Part II. *Figure II-3a*. The above judgment reflects the ratios between enrollment by sector as a percentage of total enrollments nationwide and humanities degree completions in the same sector as a percentage of total such completion nationwide. Thus (i) Doctoral – Research sector 28:49; (ii) Master’s sector 21:34; (iii) total collegiate sector 6:17; (iv) Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts sector 2.5:12.

35 For which see Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=II-3b.jpg&o=hrcoIIA.aspx\\_topII3](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=II-3b.jpg&o=hrcoIIA.aspx_topII3): Part II. *Figure II-3b: Humanities Bachelor’s Degree Completions as a Percentage of All Bachelor’s Degree Completions, by Type of Awarding Institution*, 2004. The ranking goes as follows: Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts, 31 percent; Doctoral – Research University – Extensive, 15 percent; Master’s Colleges and Universities I, 13 percent; Master’s Colleges and Universities II, 12 percent; Doctoral – Research University – Intensive, 12 percent; Baccalaureate Colleges – General, 10 percent; Baccalaureate – Associate Colleges, 6 percent.



plines in the educational life of the collegiate sector, these particular figures reveal how misleading it would be to lump together the Liberal Arts and General subdivisions of that sector. And, in this respect at least, as perhaps in one or two others,<sup>36</sup> the Liberal Arts group would appear to be a shade closer to the leading group of research universities than to any other institutional sector or subsector in higher education, their fellow colleges in the former Liberal Arts II group not excepted.<sup>37</sup>

If the percentage of baccalaureate degrees awarded in the humanities is one way of measuring the dimensions of the type of education the liberal arts colleges provide, so, too, is the percentage of those graduating from such institu-

tions who go on to complete PhD work in one or other of the humanistic disciplines. As we have seen,<sup>38</sup> the colleges, and especially the more selective among them, have long sent a remarkably high number of their graduates on to PhD programs in general. Something similar may be said in relation now to PhD programs in humanistic subjects, where the colleges (Liberal Arts and General) accounting for about 6 percent of overall student enrollments, are the baccalaureate source for 15 percent of those earning doctorates.<sup>39</sup> In gross numbers, of course, and understandably so given the overall size of their student populations, it is the large research universities that provide the bulk of the PhD candidates. At the University of California, Berkeley, alone, some 335 students from the 1995 – 1999 undergraduate cohort went on to complete doctorates in humanistic disciplines. By way of contrast, it took the comparable figures from four highly selective colleges combined (Wesleyan [Connecticut], Oberlin, Amherst, and Williams, at 129, 105, 94, and 83, respectively, for a four-college total of 411) to surpass that benchmark.<sup>40</sup> That is re-

36 So far as levels of research productivity go, at least in the humanities and social sciences, the leading group of liberal arts colleges comes very close to being aligned with the Ivy League research universities. For this, see the very hands-on investigation that McCaughey pursued, measuring the research activity of humanities and social science faculty in some two dozen liberal arts colleges against that of a control group of their colleagues at Columbia, Cornell, Princeton, and Yale. He did not claim, however, that that level of research productivity was characteristic of any more than a minority of the colleges in the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts subsector. See Robert A. McCaughey, *Scholars and Teachers: The Faculties of Select Liberal Arts Colleges and Their Place in American Higher Learning* (New York: Barnard College, 1995), especially ix, 41 – 46, 92 – 93, and 103 – 105. Cf. McCaughey, “Scholars and Teachers Revisited: In Continued Defense of College Faculty Who Publish,” in *Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education*, 88 – 97.

37 Although the gap between the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts group and any of the other sectors/subsectors is far greater than those between any of the latter.

38 See above, page 42, and note 21.

39 I draw this datum from WebCASPAR (Integrated Science and Engineering Resources Data System; <http://webcaspar.nsf.gov>). While this system is focused on science and engineering, its data resources also provide helpful information on other fields and higher education in general.

40 I am indebted for these figures (which are based on the National Science Foundation et al., *Survey of Earned Doctorates*, and on data assembled from Williams College and nine other highly selective colleges) to Chris Winters, director of institutional research at Williams College, *A Comparative Analysis of Doctoral Achievement by Williams Graduates by Discipline and Over Time* (Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College, 2007), “Top Ten Schools by Number of Grad-

spectable enough, it may be, even in terms of the raw numbers. But when recomputed in terms of the percentages of those who graduate from that collegiate cohort going on to earn doctorates in the humanities, the figures become a good deal more striking. Recomputed in that way, it turns out that nine of the leading ten institutions nationwide are liberal arts colleges, with only one of the great research universities making the list. Nor is this some sort of new development. Thirty or so years ago (using the 1967–1971 undergraduate cohort), though the list of institutions involved was not identical, the picture overall was very much the same, with eight of the leading ten institutions being liberal arts colleges.<sup>41</sup> As a group then, and to a degree out of all proportion to their number and size, the liberal arts colleges play a long-established and highly significant role in the vital, ongoing process whereby the ranks of scholars in the humanities are replenished across time.

All of that said, this would appear to be the appropriate moment to post the routine (but by no means redundant) warning to the effect that there can be no safe inference from the aggregate figures for any given institutional sector or subsector to the putative conditions prevailing on the ground at any particular institution in the group. The scholars who have focused our attention on the unusually high degree to which “good

educational practices” are characteristic of our liberal arts colleges have been careful to draw our attention also to the flattening effect of aggregation on the numbers or norms they are reporting, and to remind us that there are instances where, in this respect, colleges in the Liberal Arts sector lag behind some of the institutions in the Doctoral – Research University sector. And something analogous is the case with other claims based on aggregated figures. If, for example, the top eleven institutions ranked in the Astin-Chang study as high on both student and research orientation were all of them leading, highly selective liberal arts colleges, it would be appropriate to note, too, that Astin and Chang also found that the eight institutions that were in the top 10 percent in student orientation but the bottom 10 percent in research orientation were also liberal arts colleges, but ones drawn, this time, from the old Liberal Arts II subsector.<sup>42</sup>

All of these institutions have their own sometimes long and very individual histories, which contrive to shape their own specific intellectual and educational profiles – and do so often in quite profound ways. The variations from institution to institution even in the same overall collegiate subsector can often be quite marked. And it may reasonably be supposed that such variability extends also to the strengths and weaknesses characteristic of individual colleges in their orientation to the humanities and the scope and quality of their instruction in the various humanistic disciplines.

Such a variability is certainly evident in the numbers of graduates the leading

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uates Earning a Doctorate in Humanities,” Now (cohort 1995–1999) and “Total Doctorates Earned in Humanities (Highly Selective Coed Colleges).”

41 Ibid., “Top Ten Schools by *Percentage of Graduates Earning a Doctorate in Humanities*,” Now (cohort 1995–1999), and Then (cohort 1967–1971).

42 Astin and Chang, “Colleges that Emphasize Research and Teaching,” 45–49.

colleges send on to PhD work in the humanities, with Reed, Amherst, and St. John's College, Maryland, setting a blistering pace, which, in recent years, their competitor colleges have not matched.<sup>43</sup> A similar variability is equally evident when it comes to the presence of the humanities disciplines in the five majors most frequently chosen by students. In one set of leading, highly selective colleges, English is apparently the academic discipline most frequently included in the top five majors, with history, though fluctuating in its presence, a close second. At Williams, however, the pattern is clear, stable, and subject to few fluctuations. For the past eleven years three of the top five majors have consistently been in the humanistic disciplines (English, history, and art/art history), with the two remaining being biology and economics.<sup>44</sup> While in that consistency Williams is almost certainly not alone, I suspect it is more than a little unusual in the preeminence accorded to art history. And that fact may serve as a useful illustration of the type of educational singularity that one finds embedded in the distinctive educational histories of so many of the older colleges.

The prominence of art history at Williams is grounded in a long-established and widely celebrated tradition of cur-

ricular and pedagogic strength, bolstered by the presence at the College and in the vicinity of rich collections of art, and attested to by the extraordinary numbers of alumni who have gone on to positions of leadership in the art world at large and the museum world in particular.<sup>45</sup> Analogous nodes of distinctive curricular strength or pedagogic practice are to be found at many another college: classics at Bryn Mawr, music at Oberlin, foreign languages at Middlebury, in its heyday a justifiably celebrated general education program at Amherst, at Swarthmore a fine (and time-tested) honors seminar program involving the discipline imposed by resort to external examiners, to name just a few.<sup>46</sup>

Institutional singularities of this sort are endemic among our liberal arts colleges. Because of that, it would take a detailed, comparative study of the range and nature of the humanities courses offered at those colleges to flesh out the above appraisal of the strength and

43 Winters, *A Comparative Analysis of Doctoral Achievement*, "Top Ten Schools by Percentage of Graduates Earning a Doctorate in Humanities," Now (cohort 1995–1999). Though it would be fair to say that, given differing collegiate cultures, the ambition to match those colleges in this particular respect may have been lacking.

44 The colleges in question are Amherst, Bowdoin, Pomona, Swarthmore, Oberlin, Carleton, Grinnell, Smith, Wellesley, and Bryn Mawr. See Sorum, "New Problems in the Humanities," 253–254. The Williams College statistics cover the years 1997–2007.

45 The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art are both in the vicinity, and both make internship opportunities available to Williams students. At the present time and in the recent past Williams graduates (the so-called "Williams Mafia") have held the position of director at many a leading American museum, from the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., to the Chicago Art Institute, and from the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City to the Los Angeles County Museum.

46 Similarly, a tutorial program framed on the Oxbridge model, launched at Williams in 1987 and since much expanded, is now well on the way to becoming a signature component of the College's offerings. Each tutorial session is limited to two students who, in successive weeks, alternate the roles of essay reader and critic of the tutorial partner's essay.

quality of humanistic studies in the Liberal Arts collegiate sector as a whole. And, beyond that, if one had the further ambition of identifying the different modes of curricular and interpretative approaches in play, one would have to undertake microhistorical studies of particular humanities programs and of the fluctuating destinies across time of the various departments in the humanistic disciplines at a range of these colleges. A few such studies have indeed been attempted, and with intriguing results. They open a helpful window into the state of the humanities in this particular subsector of American higher education and into the strengths and distinctive weaknesses evident in the colleges studied. And weaknesses, it should be recognized, are sometimes no less deeply rooted than are strengths in the particular histories of the institutions involved.<sup>47</sup>

Enough, I suspect, has been said to attest to the health of humanistic studies in the Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts subsector taken as a whole and, further, to suggest that the humanities occupy a uniquely favored position in those leading, highly selective colleges,

47 For an interesting illustration of such a microhistorical endeavor, see Margaret Sabin, “Evolution and Revolution: Change in the Literary Humanities, 1968 – 1995,” in *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Alvin Kernan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 84 – 103, where she tracks in comparative fashion the divergent character of the changes undergone by the English curriculum at Amherst and Williams in the course of the theoretical turbulence characteristic of the quarter century between the late 1960s and mid-1990s. Similarly, the brief comparison of the English majors at Amherst and Wellesley by Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2001), 16 – 17.

where the humanistic disciplines occupy so very prominent a place, and the depth of commitment to high-quality undergraduate teaching is matched by an unusually strong orientation toward scholarly research and writing, especially scholarship of the sort that Ernest Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, labeled as “integrative.”<sup>48</sup>

Writing in 1999, Astin was bold enough to assert that “the selective private liberal arts college, perhaps more than any other institution of American higher education, exemplifies much of what has come to be known as best educational practice in undergraduate education,” and that “students who attend selective liberal arts colleges will enjoy unique educational benefits.”<sup>49</sup> In light of the findings reported above, no little part of that encouraging story, I would now suggest, is the strength and vibrancy of the orientation to the humanities evident at these colleges, their commitment to the maintenance of usually large cohorts of faculty in the humanistic disciplines, and the unparalleled degree to which their student bodies choose to avail themselves of the opportunities thus provided for the pursuit of humanistic studies.<sup>50</sup>

48 Oakley, *Community of Learning*, 153 – 157; Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, 15 – 25, 53 – 64; Kenneth P. Ruscio, “The Distinctive Scholarship of the Selective Liberal Arts College,” *Journal of Higher Education* 58 (2) (1987): 205 – 222.

49 Astin, “How the Liberal Arts College Affects Students,” 92, 96.

50 And not simply those who choose to major in a humanistic discipline. I would note that in the past approximately three-quarters of the Williams student body elected to take English 101 (The Study of Literature) and half

So striking indeed is all of this, and so marked is the degree of institutional exceptionalism that it suggests, that by way of conclusion, one may be permitted to wonder, perhaps a bit ruefully, why those of us fortunate enough to have been associated with these “medallion” colleges have not reached out far more forcefully than we have to encourage and sustain the ongoing health of humanistic studies (often so beleaguered) in the secondary tier of education from which we are fortunate enough to have been able to draw so many truly gifted students. Unto whomsoever so much has clearly been given, after all, may not somewhat more be properly expected?

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to take Art History 101 – 102 (Introduction to Art History). On the national scene, apart from a freshman composition course and a U.S. History survey course, no humanities course in the mid-1990s “attracted more than 32% . . . with most drawing considerably fewer”; Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoIIA.aspx#topII6>: Part II. *Indicator II-6: Most Frequently Taken College Courses*. In more recent years (2003 – 2007) introductory English literature and art history courses have almost always appeared among the five most heavily elected courses at Williams.

# Gerald Early

## *The humanities & social change*

The mere exercise of reading the text as it really is will make the reader moral and wise in a direct way that no systemic body of dogmatic teaching can rival. . . . The real point of close reading is that it produces the right sort of person – a person of evident worth.

– Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine,  
*From Humanism to the Humanities*<sup>1</sup>

The humanities today seem caught in an irresolvable contradiction. At any given moment, they see themselves either as cultural gatecrashers and agents of radical social change or cultural gate-

keepers and champions of tradition, often unsure of which act they are performing. It is hard to say whether the tension posed by this disjunction propels the humanities as potent forces in American culture or disables them as insecure, incoherent areas of study. The social, economic, and political changes of the postwar era have served only to exacerbate this sense of disjunction and sharpen opposing impulses, not resolve them.

All of the major changes in American society since the late 1940s – from revisions in immigration law to the advent of effective, mass-produced birth control; from the relaxation of taboos against obscenity to the creation of the GI Bill – can be subsumed under one concept: the democratization of American society. These changes have made any status claim based on unfair or *unmerited* advantages, including those proceeding from particular physical traits, cultural differences, or emotional and psychological conditions (that do not

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1 Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 148. Here Grafton and Jardine reflect on the changes that Erasmus brought to humanist training.

result in violent behavior),<sup>2</sup> both legally untenable and morally illegitimate. In effect, a greater number of people now enjoy greater accessibility to American cultural and social institutions.

The civil rights movement extended these transformations into the lives of black people in the United States, probably our nation's most visibly persecuted group; but it also changed how the nation overall sees racism and, more generally, social and political hierarchies based on something "natural" or biological. The paradigm shift in the situation of blacks resulted in similar movements and changes in the legal and social status of women, Hispanics, homosexuals, and other groups that had been victimized or socially degraded in America. Presently, efforts to change the status and treatment of the physically disabled, the chronically ill, the overweight, the learning disabled, the emotionally disturbed, and others continue this endless quest for equality and liberation from irrational, or seemingly irrational, prejudice that significantly affects people's ability to exercise the full benefits and entitlements of American citizenship.

Identity politics were discussed and acted upon long before the post-World War II era. (What, after all, are nationalism, religious schism, and class consciousness but forms of identity?) Take, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois's famous formulation of black identity from his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born

with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>3</sup>

But the concept of identity as we understand it today, even the widespread use of the word itself, entered American life after World War II. Du Bois deals with racial identity in *The Souls of Black Folk*, but he never once uses the word *identity*. By 1955, when James Baldwin's collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, was published, use of the word *identity* abounds. Consider these passages from one of the most famous essays in the collection, "Stranger in the Village":

[T]hat the slave in exile yet remains related to his past, has some means – if only in memory – of revering and sustaining the forms of his former life, is able, in short, to maintain his identity. This was not the case with the American Negro slave. He is unique among the black men of the world in that his past from him, almost literally, at one blow.

[T]he white man's motive was the protection of his identity; the black man was motivated by the need to establish his identity. And despite the terrorization which the Negro in America endured and endures sporadically until

2 These days, scholars commonly refer to this advantage as white privilege, or white male privilege.

3 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet Classics, 1969), 45.

today, despite the cruel and totally inescapable ambivalence of his status in his country, the battle for his identity has long ago been won.<sup>4</sup>

Baldwin's writing points to the intense preoccupation with *individual* identity against the impositions of bureaucratic or institutional structures, the right to an identity as an expression of self-determination, the politicization of the individual's need to acquire and express an identity, the formation of an identity through acts of consumption, the difficulties the individual faced in creating an identity, the quest for identity, and the ultimate meaning of identity that crystallized as a mass phenomenon during the postwar years.<sup>5</sup>

The interdisciplinary studies born during this period – black studies, women's studies, cultural studies – offered a way to combine humanities across fields, in part through the politicization of identity. What drove these amalgamations was the idea that explicit ideology can unite traditional disciplines – the Black Aesthetic or Afrocentrism for black

4 James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 169, 173. Du Bois's formulation seems more penetrating and explicit than Baldwin's in that Du Bois tries to describe what identity is and what it does or how it works. Baldwin assumes everyone knows what it is, which, by the 1950s, was probably not an unwarranted assumption. Everyone at least thought he or she knew what it was.

5 The rise of the postwar superhero comic book injected the concept of "the secret identity" into popular culture. (Superhero comics existed before and during World War II but reached the apogee of their development as a genre after the war, particularly with the advent of the Marvel "angst" superheroes of the 1960s.) Indeed, as a child I first encountered the word *identity* reading a comic book.

studies, feminism for women's studies, postmodernist, Marxist-inspired deconstruction for cultural studies – far more effectively than either a consensus subject matter or a consensus method or approach. Advocates praised these new interdisciplinary fields for making identity explicit instead of masking it, arguing that the traditional disciplines were essentially identity constructions or identity affirmations of one sort or another – usually Eurocentric, Anglo-oriented ones.

The new uncovering of identity forced several of the humanities, even as they maintained their traditional configurations, to absorb ideas of difference, diversity, and the inauthenticity of canon formation. Some humanities disciplines even began to adopt the concept of the antidiscipline, the "negative capability" of the discipline. Thus a discipline's ideology has to be "resisted" (another favorite cant word): deconstruction, demythologizing, demystifying, unmasking, and subverting came to define the act of critical analysis in several humanities disciplines.

The latest approach to interdisciplinarity in the humanities is the concept of diaspora, a variation of the old-fashioned theme of same and different, particular and universal, and yet another way of intersecting discipline with identity. Diaspora imposes two imagined communities: the original geocultural community and the worldwide neo-cultural community, which identifies itself in relation to the original geocultural community. People of a common geocultural heritage spread across the world and throughout different cultures and nations, differentiating themselves while also remaining the same.

Like many of the new hybrid fields, diaspora studies continue the work of the



civil rights movement, which politicized the nation's expanding population of college students at a time when a college education was becoming a professional and occupational necessity. This activist group of young people, mainly (though not exclusively) middle class as a result of rising postwar American prosperity, had a considerable impact on the humanities and social science curricula of many colleges and universities, particularly elite institutions. They imported the *practice* of social change from the outside in, and then brought ideas from the academy back to their social and political movements. In effect, they tried to make higher education reflect the nature of the society that it intended to serve and make society reflect some of the ideals they learned in humanities and social science classrooms.

This latter point is crucial: the movement for social change that took shape in the 1960s did not come from nowhere. The students who were part of the civil rights movement and its offshoots did not invent their ideological inclinations; they intensified the ones that they had received in their liberal arts educations. After World War II, leading humanist and humanities-oriented social science scholars and intellectuals associated with some of our best schools – Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter, Arthur Schlesinger, Kenneth Clarke, Lionel Trilling, E. Franklin Frazier, John Hope Franklin, Elliott Liebow, Marshall Stearns, among others – saw the defeat of fascism and the containment of communism as the triumph of liberalism, evidence that there were no rational ideological alternatives to liberalism, that the only thing better than liberalism was more liberalism as a sort of never-ending proof of its own moral and political fitness. What else could liberalism do but seek equality and liberation for all who were unequal

and not free? To this end, scholars presented liberalism to their students as a moral necessity.

Liberal education of the postwar era taught students to value social change as an unquestioned social good and see it as only a one-way street: all social change was progressive. A major tenet of liberalism is progress, and the questions we ask to gauge the extent of social change reflect how powerfully liberalism underlines many of the assumptions, political evaluations, and judgments of our society: How much progress have we made in race relations? How far have women come? Can we improve the status of the poor? The assumption behind such questions is that reform and liberation always lead from bad to better, an assumption that coincides with how Americans generally see the arc of their history, as a narrative of redemption. Liberalism is our invisible, default ideology, our civic piety.

It is striking to note, then, how few historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) ever adopted women's studies, black studies, or even creative writing programs, despite having a number of radicalized students in the 1960s. Black colleges, largely conservative institutions, retained their conservatism and refused to adopt many of the changes that were occurring. One wonders whether they would have been better off if they had adopted them, or if it is too late to adopt them now. As it happened, HBCUs changed mostly by becoming poorer: losing their best students and faculty to white institutions and losing ground in the educational marketplace much as women's colleges have. Why this is has a great deal to do with the essential historical differences between black and white higher education, the distinct clientele they served, and the larger political and social pur-

poses for which they were created. In some respects, however, the decline of the HBCUs can be traced to the nation's ambivalent, confused response to the concept of merit.

At first, merit, and the ability to measure it objectively, seemed the solution to all “unnatural” or politically constructed inequalities. With merit-measuring as a sort of color-blind, gender-neutral, class-unconscious, social threshing machine, deserving talent, wherever it was, would be recognized and rise to the top. (Du Bois expressed this belief for blacks as the construction of a “Talented Tenth.”) In the early days of racial integration, objective merit was strongly advocated and examples of its effectiveness were touted: Jackie Robinson's successful integration of Major League Baseball in 1947, Ralph Ellison's winning the National Book Award for fiction in 1952, and the integration of the American military during the Korean War. (Truman issued an executive order to desegregate the military in 1948, two years before the Korean War, but the war greatly accelerated the process.) During the 1960s, however, the idea of merit itself was attacked. In the new liberal critique, merit was a construction that reflected the values and rules of the dominant class to preserve a plutocracy disguised as an elite of talent and brains. Moreover, it was false to believe that merit could be objectively measured and numerically rendered.<sup>6</sup> This analy-

6 See the famous British satire by Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy: An Essay on Education and Equality* (1958; repr., Baltimore: Penguin, 1971). The fact that the idea of merit became closely aligned with intelligence testing and IQ led, in part, to the severe criticism of the concept, as postwar liberalism has generally expressed unease about IQ tests.

sis led to the attack on skills-based testing as unfair and inherently biased.

But merit, indeed a moral formulation when connected with the idea of “deserving,” also had the patina of the scientific, as it represented the objective and the measurable, twin obsessions that have become forms of intellectual virtue in our society. Ultimately, the concept of merit came to reflect the sense of insecurity at the heart of the humanities. On the one hand, wishing to exhibit both rigor and method in a scientific age that prized both, the humanities found measurable, objective merit in both their content and their pedagogy to be enormously valuable. (A Great Books curriculum – tough, typically Eurocentric books that nobody read but that everyone thought ought to be read, plus a dusting of Latin and Ancient Greek – was a huge guarantor of humanistic merit.) On the other hand, it was largely scholars in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences who were interested in the social changes that most vigorously challenged the concept of merit as unfair and illusory, who considered Great Books courses as unnecessary, unjustified, and simply a hegemonic expression of cultural propaganda or, worse, snobbery. These scholars' quest was to make the humanities less “elitist” and more democratic and accessible to all, to ask, who determines what is a Great Book? What indeed constitutes greatness in a book?

During the postwar years, this version of merit challenged both the democratic impulses of the gatecrashers and the elitism of the gatekeepers, and humanists have ever since been unable to resolve the conflict. It seems to me useless to say that the postwar humanities are functional or dysfunctional according to some normative set of expectations, as no particularly stable set of normative

expectations has ever governed them. What we do know is that the humanities very much reflect their times, for good or ill, even as they struggle for ways to reflect the past on its own terms. The kind of humanities education we have at any given moment may not necessarily be the kind we think we deserve, but it may be the only kind we can want or vehemently not want – or the only kind we think we want or think we hate.

*The  
humanities  
& social  
change*

# Michael Wood

## *A world without literature?*

Just over ten years ago, the mood of a large section of the North American academic world was caught in the title of a volume published by Princeton University Press with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The volume asked, *What's Happened to the Humanities?* – not, what are the humanities doing these days? or even, what are they doing to themselves? Instead, the pure passive dilemma: what has happened to them?<sup>1</sup> The volume contains wonderful essays full of intelligent commentary and ideas, but the effect of the work as a whole is a scent of sophisticated disarray. Prestige, centrality, tradition, students, a public, and financial support: all gone. And for no reason that we could see – except for a more than slight tendency to blame a few of our own colleagues and their

softness on “postmodernism” for doing us in. But even this sort of supposed appeasement couldn’t single-handedly have caused such a collapse: history, or something, had happened to us, the humanities, with the study of English literature often at our stated or implied core. After all, literary study is where “elaborate exercises in various kinds of reading and writing” have long been most immediately visible, according to the volume’s editor, Alvin Kernan.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, all had not gone, and has not gone yet. But the bewilderment of the profession was real, only partly reduced by a series of very good books that set out to explore the logic, history, and sociology of our condition. I am thinking especially of John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* (1993), David Simpson’s *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature* (1995), and Marjorie Garber’s *Academic Instincts* (2001), among quite a few others. There was a real crisis, and even those of us who believed the crisis might be an opportunity rather than a doom had to do some hard thinking. It wasn’t a matter

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1 Alvin Kernan, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

2 *Ibid.*, 9.

merely of offering sunniness instead of sorrow, for as Simpson bitingly puts it, we cannot “afford the mere celebrations of the literary as a new lease of cultural political hope.”<sup>3</sup>

We have, in the last ten years or so, entered a phase of self-exploration and self-explanation based mainly on the assumption that others – our university colleagues in other disciplines, politicians, journalists, the public – do not understand what we do or why it matters, although they would like to. There is every reason to revoke the old paradigm (one of the old paradigms), by which all we do is doubt, seek to unravel, and destroy every piece of apparent knowledge that comes our way – as if literary criticism is a paradise for skeptics and no one else. Literary study produces various kinds of knowledge, as Guillory suggests, and the Humanities Indicators Prototype of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences eloquently names “the great and varied archive of the human record” as the database of the humanities in general.<sup>4</sup> How to study, use, and add to this archive is a grand exercise in knowing; and the beauty of exercise, the grandness of it, is that the smallest addition counts, just as every beach is made of grains of sand.

This knowledge includes all of the gains of literary history and formalism, easily construed according to cumulative models of knowledge. But literary criticism is rather different, and we may wonder whether we wish to claim knowledge as its chief result. Since crit-

icism always involves rereading, returning to old knowledge rather than encountering new, literary criticism often (significantly) rearranges understanding rather than increases it. Guillory says we should nevertheless see this understanding, in its developed and skillfully practiced form, as a strong contribution to knowledge, and asserts that in recent times we have failed “to define and defend the knowledge claims of criticism.”<sup>5</sup>

In this context, we need to explain our ways of reading to those who have not been trained in them, to delineate the modern equivalent of what Nietzsche called the unnatural sciences: the exploration, in many cases, of what is familiar, and therefore in some senses the most difficult to grasp. In Nietzsche’s intricate and only roughly translatable play on words – “*Das Bekannte . . . ist am schwersten zu ‘erkennen’*” – the known is what is hardest to know. Nietzsche writes:

The familiar is what we are used to, and what we are used to is the most difficult to “know” – that is, to view as a problem, to see as strange, as distant, as “outside us.” . . . The great certainty of the natural sciences in comparison with psychology and the critique of the elements of consciousness – with the *unnatural* sciences, one might almost say – rests precisely on the fact that they take the *strange* as their object, while it is nearly contradictory and absurd even to want to take the not-strange as one’s object.<sup>6</sup>

3 David Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 180.

4 From a draft version of the Humanities Indicators Prototype, “Defining the Humanities”; on file with author.

5 John Guillory, “The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2) (Winter 2002): 507.

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 215.

By “psychology and the critique of the elements of consciousness” (*Psychologie und Kritik der Bewußtseins-Elemente*) Nietzsche doesn’t mean what we now call the humanities, but he doesn’t mean just what we now call psychology either. He means what philosophy so often was in the later nineteenth century when it wasn’t idealism: namely, a combination of philosophy of mind and experimental science. And while “critique of the elements of consciousness” doesn’t sound much like what Dickens and Balzac were after, it comes a little closer to George Eliot and Henry James. By the time we get to Joyce and Woolf we may start to wonder whether novelists do anything else.

We are trying to explain our unnatural science to the natural scientists and to all of those who take the natural sciences as their model for the production of knowledge. We are getting better at this, but there is a long way to go; much work is needed.<sup>7</sup> And we must do this work in a world of shifting priorities and predispositions. Everything I have said so far assumes goodwill on the part of those who don’t understand us (yet) – no hostility or real intellectual difficulty, no major resistance attitude to our enterprise. I am no longer sure this assumption is sound. My sense is that we now live, at least partly, in a world generally so devoted to information and narrow ideas of (political) usefulness that it has to be hostile to the humanities whether it wants to be or not, because it can’t get a feeling of triviality or unnecessariness out of its mind when it thinks of them, if it thinks of them at

all. The arts often escape this worldview because they are a practice. It’s the practice of studying a practice, as the humanist critic does, that seems marginal, if not wasteful.

My response to the assumption of triviality is to suggest, not that we cannot live without literature and the humanities – we can, alas, as far too many people know, live without almost everything – but that we can perhaps get closest to what literature and the humanities mean if we go as far as we can toward imagining a world without them.

A child stands in a weed-filled field, “aimless and alone.” He is the inheritor, we are told, of a world marked by boots, barbed wire, speeches, marches, war, executions: somewhere, we are inclined to believe, in the European twentieth century. The child expects violence, and maybe nothing but violence – large-scale, persistent violence. Even his throwing a stone at a bird, unkind in its small way, evokes the gentler place and time he does not know, because it seems so youthful and ordinary an act. This impression deepens when we learn that the rape of a girl and the knifing of a boy are “axioms” to this child: not only actual and perhaps frequent, but something like a set of rules. For an axiom, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, is “a proposition that commends itself to general acceptance; a well-established or universally-conceded principle; a maxim, rule, law.”

This child is poor – “ragged” is the word we are offered – and inured to violence, but there is worse to come, in one very special sense. He has

never heard

Of any world where promises were kept,  
Or one could weep because another wept.

<sup>7</sup> My book, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), is a preliminary attempt at such work, a defense and an illustration of criticism as I understand it.

The precision of the language is important, as are the deeply desolate implications: “never,” “any.” We need to register how far this place is from the forms of life even the most cynical among us may think we know. We have inhabited worlds where promises were not often kept, perhaps even where they were never kept; we can easily imagine the death of all human sympathy. But we can scarcely imagine *never having heard of* such sympathy or of promises that were kept. And one of the reasons for this impossibility is what used to be called poetry and is now usually called literature: the representation of imagined lives and minds, often modeled closely on existing exemplars but also always potentially retaining important instances of which no contemporary or recent case can be found. Literature is full of portraits of reality’s victims, from Antigone to Anna Karenina. But literature also remembers what reality forgets.

I’m not going to linger over the ragged child, except to say that you can find him in W. H. Auden’s poem “The Shield of Achilles,” and that the modern equipment – the boots, the barbed wire, and the twentieth-century political scene – appears to Thetis, Achilles’s surprised Greek mother, as the array of images the god Hephaestus is placing on the shield he is making for the hero: not vines and olive trees as in Homer, but a bare plain crowded with waiting people; not “ritual pieties” but official murder; not games and dancing but the “weed-choked field” where the child stands. It’s an intricate and subtle poem, and it can be read many ways: as against war, against modernity; as seeing the present in the past or the past in the present; as a reminder that heroes like “the strong / Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles” will always have

their part in the creation of every post-war wasteland.<sup>8</sup> My interest is in what the child doesn’t know, and how he could have known it.

Storytelling would have done as well as novels; plays and movies as well as poems. For the moment I’m taking literature to mean the whole realm of shaped, fictive stories, whatever their means of incarnation. And to seek to imagine a world without literature in this sense – without myth or legend or fairy tale; without dreams or fables or old jokes or any form of cherished untruth – is to begin to understand what literature is for, and what extreme imaginative poverty might look like. Think of a world that is not only without hope but has never heard of hope.

I’m not suggesting that we live in such a world, or even that we are in immediate danger of arriving there. I believe in optimism of the intellect as well as optimism of the will. But such a world is possible, even if we can’t quite see it yet, and I call up the picture as the centerpiece of my case for the urgency of an attention to literature, an attention that is not a part-time frill, or a mode of self-improvement, or an acquisition of cultural capital; not the ordinary working of the culture industry or the academic economy; not the training of taste or

8 See Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 18, in *Chapman’s Homer: The Iliad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 384–388, and W. H. Auden, “The Shield of Achilles,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1976), 454–455. Here is the full stanza about the boy:

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,  
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird  
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:  
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,  
Were axioms to him, who’d never heard  
Of any world where promises were kept,  
Or one could weep because another wept.

the education of the spirit; not a replacement for religion or an escape from history. Literature can play any and all of these roles, of course, and does so very usefully at various times. But none of them belongs to literature alone, which can easily be replaced in every case; and none of them constitutes an adequate defense in stormy weather – or, worse, in a climate of bland indifference and swift dismissal. I want to try and say why literature is more than an attractive cultural ornament or option, and more than a delightful mystery to which many of us are devoted.

Three provisos or precisions are necessary at this point. First, the moral world of the child in the poem would not be remedied by the mere mention, even an infinitely repeated mention, of the possibility of kept promises or live sympathy. Literature is not a matter of naming things; it does not deal in information or announcement. Literature is embodiment, a mode of action; it works over time on the hearts and minds of its readers or hearers. Its result in us, when we are receptive or lucky, is the activation of personal knowledge: knowledge of others and ourselves; knowledge of stubborn, slippery, or forgotten facts; knowledge of old and new possibilities – a knowledge that is often so intimate and so immediate that it scarcely feels like knowledge at all because it feels like something we have always known.

Second, neither literature nor any other instance of the humanities can make us better people, or even tell us unequivocally what a good person is. There is danger of a too-easy piety lurking in the word *human* at the heart of the humanities, as if to be human is always to be moral, or “we’d all be human if we could,” as a crooked character in Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* sings

with manifest insincerity. The Humanities Indicators Prototype speaks firmly of asking “not just about what it means to be human, but what it means to be a good human being; not just about behavior but about ethical behavior; not just about life but about meaningful life.”<sup>9</sup> It is important to remember that these are in fact questions and not answers, that our attention to them needs to be critical and demanding, thoughtful and open. Auden’s poem doesn’t tell us to keep our promises, or that we shall be saved if we do; there are indeed promises that no one should ever keep. The poem invites us to reflect on promises and their consequences, to picture them as a possibility and a value, even a danger; to wonder exactly what would be wrong with a world where no promises were kept, and what we are to do if we are afraid we live in such a world already. If we speak, as I have, about imaginative poverty, just what are we talking about? This is a question for the imagination itself, not for the preacher lurking in us.

Third, it is important to be both precise and flexible about the various media (print, spoken word, theater, cinema, comic books, cartoons, among others) in which work in the humanities (or work the humanities choose to study) comes to us. The Humanities Indicators Prototype refers broadly and generously to “the ways in which we invest social actions with meaning and create artifacts – be they a textile or a song or a story or a philosophical treatise.”<sup>10</sup> This range is important, and even the most literary among us need to remember that books are not everything, that the imagination lives in many other places.

9 “Defining the Humanities.”

10 Ibid.



But books are a great deal, and we should not take with equanimity the fact that the reading of literature in the United States has declined by 18 percent over the last twenty years, most steeply among persons between eighteen and twenty-four years of age. There is also the sobering fact that we seem to read less, not more, as we grow older. In 2002, 57 percent of the inhabitants of the United States older than eighteen had read at least one book for pleasure in the previous twelve months; this percentage was down from 60.9 in 1992. It needs to be said, too, that the proportion of those who had read a work of literature was considerably smaller: 46.7 in 2002. Even so, and perhaps surprisingly, the United States does better in this rather unsophisticated competition than say France and Germany. The highest scorers are Sweden, Canada, and Finland. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the available figures is the fact that reading rates for literature went up from 1982 to 1992, at least among those aged forty-five to seventy-four, and then by 2002 fell in each case to well below their 1982 level. It would be easy to blame the Internet and a mistake to leave it out of the account. But there does seem to be some other, correctable story here, a question of wanting or needing (or not wanting or not needing) to know about other worlds.<sup>11</sup>

11 See especially Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3a.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx\\_\\_topV3](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3a.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx__topV3); Part V. *Figure V-3a: Percentage of Americans 18 Years & Older Who Read a Book Other Than for Work or School during the Previous 12 Months, by Age, 1992 – 2002*; [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3b.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx\\_\\_topV3](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3b.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx__topV3); *Figure V-3b: Percentage of Adult Population Having Read a Book (Fiction or Nonfiction) Other Than for Work or School in the Previous 12 Months, U.S. & E.U. -15 Countries,*

Commenting on Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Why the Classics," J. M. Coetzee paraphrases what he takes to be the poet's answer to that question: "because they provide models of response to misfortune that . . . will outlast us."<sup>12</sup> The paraphrase is necessary because the poem finally offers only the negative image of an answer, suggesting that small sorrows and self-pity, if they are all we take as the subject of our art, will leave only small sad memories behind them,

like lovers weeping  
in a small dirty hotel  
when wall-paper dawns.

The response to misfortune needs not only to outlast us, but outlast us in a manner that will not seem shabby. In glossing Herbert's answer Coetzee is already reframing and broadening the question into one about acceptable endurance. Why the classics – the poem and the question – is "an appeal for a model of how to become a classic, that is, how to endure"; how to, as Coetzee puts it later in the same essay, "withstand the battering of time."<sup>13</sup> The important word here is the repeated *model*. Neither poet nor critic tells us at this point how the model works or how to find such a model for ourselves, only what the model is for: the classic's

2001/2002; and [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3d.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx\\_\\_topV3](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3d.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx__topV3); *Figure V-3d: Percentage of Americans 18 Years & Older Who Read a Novel, Short Story, Poem, or Play in the Last 12 Months, by Age, 1982 – 2002* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008).

12 J. M. Coetzee, "Zbigniew Herbert and the Figure of the Censor," in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 151.

13 *Ibid.*, 151, 159.

job is to make classics possible, to picture and provoke enduring responses to misfortune. However, Coetzee does close by telling us, elliptically but powerfully, what a classic is:

Whatever popular opinion may say, whatever the classics themselves may claim, the classic does not belong to an ideal order, nor is it attained by adhering to one set of ideas or another. On the contrary, the classic is the human; or, at least, it is what survives of the human.<sup>14</sup>

What is a classic is a slightly different question from Herbert's, why the classics?, which is slightly different again from Italo Calvino's, why read the classics?; but it is among these questions that I find the urgency and the energy I am seeking in support of literature and the study of literature. Indeed I am close to wanting to reverse Coetzee's claim in regard to Herbert and say that if the notion of the human is under threat, then the argument should be perhaps not that a classic is what survives of the human, but that whatever survives will be some sort of classic for us, an indispensable relic, however impoverished. My further (triple) claim, which I am not going to lay out in detail but which does underlie a great deal of what I am trying to say, is that classics in this sense can belong as readily to new and so-called low culture as to old or high; that a literature without classics, whether in folklore or fancy print, is not a literature; and that we can't have classics at all without a whole rich accompaniment of non-classics, both of criticism and of literary art.

In 1981 Calvino wrote an essay he later called "Why read the classics?"

14 Ibid., 162.

In its initial newspaper form it was rather more mockingly called "Italians, I exhort you to read the classics."<sup>15</sup> This earlier title picks up the conclusion of the essay, where Calvino notes he has mentioned only one Italian name (Leopardi) among all of the many works he has so far named. He says, "Now I ought to rewrite the whole article making it clear that the classics help us understand who we are and where we have got to, and that consequently Italian classics are indispensable to us Italians in order to compare them with foreign classics, and foreign classics are equally indispensable so that we can measure them against Italian classics."<sup>16</sup> We could of course in our context substitute "English and American classics" for "Italian classics" in that sentence.

But then Calvino goes on: "After that I should really rewrite it a third time, so that people do not believe that classics must be read because they serve some purpose. The only reason that can be adduced in their favour is that reading the classics is better than not reading the classics." Then he tells the story of Socrates, just before his death, learning a new melody on the flute. When asked what use that is going to be to him, Socrates says, "At least I will learn this melody before I die."<sup>17</sup>

Although Calvino claims to pinpoint only one "reason that can be adduced in their favour," he gives us fourteen different reasons for reading the classics – or at least fourteen different definitions of a classic. They are all relevant to my ar-

15 Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* trans. Martin McLaughlin (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 7. Originally published as *Perché leggere i classici?* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995).

16 Ibid., 9.

17 Ibid.

gument (even if my argument is not centrally about the classics), but one is especially important: “Your’ classic is a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you to define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it.”<sup>18</sup> Just because your classic is not mine doesn’t mean you don’t have one, even if your classic is something to which I can’t conceive of lending the term. The form of poverty I am interested in is the one where neither of us has a classic of any kind – or has never heard of such a thing.

Calvino adds, along the lines of the literary catholicism I evoked a paragraph or two back, that for him the term *classic* is one “which makes no distinction in terms of antiquity, style or authority.” Furthermore, he names Rousseau as one of his classic authors precisely because, as he says, this writer’s “thoughts and actions . . . arouse in me an irrepressible urge to contradict, criticize and argue with him.”<sup>19</sup> There is all the difference in the world between saying we all need to read the same books and saying we should all, if we can, have books in our lives to which we cannot remain indifferent, especially, perhaps, if our non-indifference takes the form of disagreement. And although Coetzee and Calvino appear to define opposite poles of urgency, desperate and debonair – a classic is what remains of the human; a classic is to be read for no purpose – they are, I suggest, approaching precisely the same subject through very different tones: the work or the story through which we think our lives, and without which our lives are not quite thinkable. Both writers, notably, associate thought and endurance with criticism.

18 *Ibid.*, 7.

19 *Ibid.*

Coetzee’s phrase “ideal order” glances at T. S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” and in 1991, the same year in which he published his Herbert essay, Coetzee gave close attention to another famous Eliot piece, a lecture called “What Is a Classic?” Coetzee’s essay, also originally a lecture and also titled “What Is a Classic?,” opens with a careful situating of Eliot’s talk: “In October of 1944, as Allied forces were battling on the European mainland and German rockets were falling on London, Thomas Stearns Eliot, aged fifty-six, gave his presidential address to the Virgil Society.”<sup>20</sup> This is the world, or about to be the world, of Auden’s poem, although this connection is mine rather than Coetzee’s. Coetzee offers two definitions of the classic as he thinks Eliot understands it: “a book that has lasted a long time” and “a book that will bear the weight of having read into it a meaning for Eliot’s own age.”<sup>21</sup> Correspondingly he gives us two interpretations of what Eliot is doing. In the view Coetzee describes as “broadly sympathetic,” Eliot is responding to Virgil as a voice from the long literary tradition he had evoked in the earlier essay. In the other, “broadly unsympathetic” view, Eliot is engaged in the “essentially magical enterprise of a man trying to redefine the world around himself.”<sup>22</sup> This second scheme is fraught with historical difficulty. Virgil has to be converted into the essential European; England has to acquire a European identity it didn’t want in 1944 and conceivably wants even less now; and the American Eliot had to have been

20 J. M. Coetzee, “What Is a Classic?” in *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986 – 1999* (New York: Viking, 2001), 1.

21 *Ibid.*, 5.

22 *Ibid.*, 7.

in some sense English all along. Coetzee clearly thinks the unsympathetic view is right, although he is himself rather sympathetic to it since he sees it as a colonial predicament.

Coetzee is too historically minded to have any truck with Eliot's ethereal tradition – that is just what his dismissive glance at the “ideal order” means – but he does want to ask a transhistorical question and find, if he can, a historical answer. “Is being spoken to across the ages a notion that we can entertain today only in bad faith?”<sup>23</sup> He answers first with another question: how does a literary (or musical) voice speak across the ages anyway? Bach is a classic, Coetzee suggests, not because the intrinsic qualities of his work are sufficient to guarantee immortality or because his reputation has never lapsed or because of a specific, finally enduring historical revival, but because “the musical profession has ways of keeping what it values alive that are qualitatively different from the ways in which the institutions of literature keep submerged but valued writers alive.”<sup>24</sup> It takes a series of committed performers to keep playing together or playing for each other, even if there is no “public awareness” of the work they care about, “even among educated people.”<sup>25</sup> But this playing, Coetzee says, returning to the question he had only apparently abandoned, is itself a form of testing, a continuing speech across the ages. The musical classic is what survives “minute listening and practical criticism” of the hardest and most informed kind. “The criterion of testing and survival,” Coetzee continues,

“is not just a minimal, pragmatic Horatian standard” (the standard of duration), but “a criterion that expresses a certain confidence in the tradition of testing, and a confidence that professionals will not devote labor and attention, generation after generation, to sustaining pieces of music whose life functions have terminated.”<sup>26</sup>

This is, of course, another way of saying, without “invoking any idealist justification of ‘value in itself,’”<sup>27</sup> that the classic is what survives, and at this point in his lecture Coetzee does indeed turn to Herbert and to a fiercer notion of survival than he describes in his essay on the Polish poet – or perhaps only a more specific version of the same notion, including the reversal of emphasis I suggested:

It is not the possession of some essential quality that, in Herbert's eyes, makes it possible for the classic to withstand the assault of barbarism. Rather, what survives the worst of barbarism, surviving because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs – that is the classic.<sup>28</sup>

History, in other words, offers its own grim form of testing, a testing that in my interpretation of the world of “The Shield of Achilles” no work has managed to pass. But there are less drastic tests, and this is where our works of art and our works of criticism have their necessary meeting. “For as long as the classic needs to be protected from attack,” Coetzee writes, “it can never prove itself a classic.” We could even define the function of criticism

23 Ibid., 13.

24 Ibid., 14.

25 Ibid., 15.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 16.

in this way: “criticism is that which is duty-bound to interrogate the classic.”<sup>29</sup>

Criticism plays the role of history in dark times and of musical performance during the lulls in a great composer’s reputation. And we can criticize the critic, too, as the title of one of Eliot’s essays has it; my own skepticism, for example, about “the professionals” Coetzee seems to me too eager to rely on, can be a test, and can be tested. Literary criticism, often thought to be the battleground of masterful subjectivities – Dr. Johnson or Harold Bloom versus all-comers – is an open location for the practical discussion, evidence literally in hand, of all kinds of topics and modes of embodying them – and even more indispensably at this moment perhaps, for understanding just how the proposition that everyone has a right to be heard is different from the proposition that all opinions are of equal value. The right is ideally indisputable. The value is precisely what we need to talk about, and we can’t know in advance how any opinion will fare. Criticism, we could say, is duty-bound to interrogate opinions, and we may need to keep arguing even when an opinion has become classic. The point is not that an argument can (or can’t) be settled for good. The point is that it can be settled, or at least fully understood, only by hard critical work and large quantities of good faith and goodwill. There are, alas, children and adults who have never heard of such things, as well as many adults who pretend they never have.

Imagine a country, then, a time or a place, whose inhabitants have never heard of any world where promises are kept or human sympathy is active, where appropriate and enduring re-

sponses to misfortune are possible, and where such promises, sympathy, and responses are vividly alive in practical memory and constantly questioned for their value, because anything short of such remembrance and such testing is seen to be sheer barbarism. And imagine then, if you will, what could survive in such a mentally and morally attenuated world. Not nothing, certainly: there are disasters short of the supreme disaster. But how much, and what would it be?

29 Ibid.

# Poem by Rosanna Warren

## *The Twelfth Day*

FOR PAM CANTOR

It is the twelfth day  
The hero will not take food  
He refuses wine sleep women

How can the body not spoil?  
Dragged by chariot  
gashed smeared

in mud and horse droppings  
Mutilate Mutilate  
cries the hero's heart

as he lashes the horses  
around and  
around the tomb

If he can just  
make his mark on this  
corpse whose

beauty freshens  
with each lunge  
as though bathed

in balm Even the gods  
in gentle feast are  
shocked: Is there no

shame? The hero has  
no other life  
He has taken

to heart a body  
whose face vaulting  
through gravel and blood

blends strangely  
with the features  
of that other

one: the Beloved  
For this is  
love: rigor

mortis in the  
mortal grip  
and never to let

go Achilles hoards  
and defiles the dead  
So what if heaven

and earth reverberate  
*release* So what  
if Olympian

messages shoot through  
cloudbanks sea  
chambers ether

So what if everything  
echoes the Father *let go let*  
*go* This is Ancient

Poetry It's supposed  
to repeat  
The living mangle the dead

after they mangle the living  
It's formulaic  
That's how we love It's called

compulsion Poetry can't  
help itself  
And no one has ever

explained how  
light stabbed  
the hero how he saw

in dawn salt mist  
his Mother's face (she who  
Was before words she

who would lose him)  
Saw her but heard  
words *Let him let*

*go* Saw her and let  
his fingers loosen  
from that

suspended decay and  
quietly  
too quietly

turned away

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# Caroline W. Bynum

## *Perspectives, connections & objects: what's happening in history now?*

In 1997, Princeton University Press published a volume, *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, which rang with alarm.<sup>1</sup> Even contributors such as Francis Oakley, Carla Hesse, and Lynn Hunt, who tried to warn against despair by explaining how the current situation had come about, provided only a fragile defense against fundamental and deeply threatening change, while others such as Denis Donoghue and Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote in palpable fear of the future. As Frank Kermode, author of an earlier, brilliant study of our need for literary endings, phrased it in his essay for the volume, "If we wanted to be truly apocalyptic we should even consider the possibility that nothing of much present concern either to 'humanists' or to their opponents will long survive."

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And it was clear from his essay that he was more afraid of the end of literature than of the demise of those who, as he put it, "mistrust or despise" it.<sup>2</sup>

Returning ten years later – and from the perspective of a historian – to the scenarios feared or envisioned in 1997, what strikes me is how wrong they were, but for reasons quite different from those given in the spate of recent publications alleging some sort of new "turn" (narrative, social, historical, material, eclectic, or performative, to name a few) "beyond" the earlier turn (linguistic, cultural, post-structural, postmodern, and so forth)

1 Alvin Kernan, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). For helpful discussion of the issues raised in my article and for bibliographical suggestions, I am grateful to Patricia Crone, Nicola di Cosmo, Jeffrey Hamburger, Jonathan Israel, Peter Jelavich, Joel Kaye, Barbara Kowalzig, Glenn Peers, Joan Scott, Heinrich von Staden, and Stephen D. White.

2 Frank Kermode, "Changing Epochs," in *What's Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Kernan, 162–178, especially 177. On literary endings, see Kermode, *Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction: With a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

that supposedly caused all the trouble in the first place. For as Keith Thomas remarked in an astute and upbeat assessment in 2006, historical scholarship has become broader, more nuanced and more creative over the past decade.<sup>3</sup> It has done so exactly because the insights of the linguistic turn have been absorbed and utilized; and this has happened because those insights coincide in great part with what historians have always known.

I do not dismiss or ridicule the fears of the mid-1990s. What Alvin Kernan calls “reading to find the villain” did threaten both sensitive literary criticism and thoughtful historical account.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, we can all remember statements (better now left unattributed) about the footnote as instrument of patriarchal domination, or the violence of the meta-narrative, that confused scholarly prose with the physical abuse of persons and communities (although if my memory serves, such opinions were more characteristic of the 1970s than the 1990s). There were times in the past three decades when I, too, felt that literary criticism tended to barricade, behind the barbed wire of jargon, the poetry and fiction to which I had always turned when I wanted to imagine something different from myself or to explore, in some resonant yet also quiet place, the complexity of my human hopes and fears. Attention to the stance and perspective of the historian, critic, or anthropologist did lead to a sometimes tire-

some narcissism, even solipsism, in scholarly writing.<sup>5</sup> But little of this seems to me to have been postmodern or poststructuralist *per se*. As a contributor to *The Three Penny Review* said recently, there have always been bad books,<sup>6</sup> just as there have always been envious, defensive, and silly scholarly responses to other scholars. And if, as Lynn Hunt pointed out in 1997, the growth of new subjects such as feminism, gender, post-colonialism, and cultural studies was a response to changing demographics, it is unreasonable not to expect an increase in the sheer number of bad books in such burgeoning fields, since nothing suggests that brilliance is characteristic of a larger percentage of today’s undergraduates, graduate students, or professors than it was earlier.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as publishers are increasingly willing to review and publish manuscripts in only those areas they think will sell, and department chairpersons and senior professors put greater and greater pressure on young scholars to produce what Jonathan Beck has cynically called work that counts, is countable, and is counted, it will require courage (as indeed it has always done) to tackle genuinely

5 As Merry Wiesner-Hanks puts it, quoting a colleague: “We used to do Dante’s life and works, then with New Criticism we did ‘the work,’ then with New Historicism we did Dante’s works in their historical location, then with post-structuralism we did Dante and me, and now we just do me”; “Women, Gender, and Church History,” *Church History* 71 (2002): 600–620, especially 600.

6 Dan Frank, “Symposium on Editing,” *The Three Penny Review* 29 (1) (Spring 2008): 16.

7 Lynn Hunt, “Democratization and Decline? The Consequences of Demographic Change in the Humanities,” in *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Kernan, 17–31.

3 Keith Thomas, “History Revisited,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, October 11, 2006.

4 Alvin Kernan, “Change in the Humanities and Higher Education,” in *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Kernan, 9.

new topics.<sup>8</sup> Such professional pressures seem to me to constitute the real threat we face, and some aspects of a postmodern (in particular, deconstructive) stance toward scholarship may provide a partial defense against them. I shall return to professional pressures at the end of this essay. First, a consideration of where the writing of history is today.

The past three decades have seen a number of discussions of the application of what is known generically as “theory” to historical scholarship. With minor differences, they have told the same story up to the late 1990s.<sup>9</sup>

8 Jonathan Beck, “After New Literary History and Theory? Notes on the MLA Hit Parade and the Currencies of Academic Exchange,” *New Literary Theory* 26 (1995): 695–709, quoted in Margery Sabin, “Evolution and Revolution: Change in the Literary Humanities, 1968–1995,” in *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Kernan, 85.

9 Among many accounts I might cite, see John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *The American Historical Review* 92 (4) (1987): 879–907; Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Joan W. Scott, “Against Eclecticism,” in “Derrida’s Gift,” special issue, *Differences* 16 (3) (Fall 2005): 114–137; Joan W. Scott, “History-writing as critique,” in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (New York: Routledge, 2007), 19–38; Peter Jelavich, “Cultural History,” in *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, ed. Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 227–237; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York:

Routledge, 2005); Lisa M. Bitel, “Period Trouble: The Impossibility of Teaching Feminist Medieval History,” in *Paradigms and Methods in Early Medieval Studies*, ed. Celia Chazelle and Felice Lifshitz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 203–220.

Social historians and sociologists have tended to emphasize the rejection of, or evolution beyond, Marxist history; intellectual historians have tended to lay more emphasis on literary and psychoanalytic criticism. But with remarkable unanimity, they all begin the account with Saussure and the development of semiotics, circa 1916, and understand the great shift of the late 1960s to early 1980s as away from social history (in both its Marxist and cliometric, or quantitative, forms – the latter touted in the 1960s as the wave of the future) and toward cultural history, influenced both by French intellectuals, above all Foucault and Derrida, and American anthropologists, especially Clifford Geertz.

This cultural or linguistic, poststructuralist or postmodern turn is usually understood to hold that language does not reflect the world but precedes it and makes it intelligible by constructing it: in other words, there is no objective universe independent of language and no transparent relationship between social organization and individual self-understanding. Such awareness entails, for historians, the realization that the categories and periods they use are expository devices that need constant reformulation exactly because they are always based in political and social assumptions that may, because inherited, be very hard to detect. The past does not come in economic, social, or military chunks, nor in centuries; wars and renaissances, like “resistance” and “corruption,” are created by historians, although aggression, power, and creativity (which are not,

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Routledge, 2005); Lisa M. Bitel, “Period Trouble: The Impossibility of Teaching Feminist Medieval History,” in *Paradigms and Methods in Early Medieval Studies*, ed. Celia Chazelle and Felice Lifshitz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 203–220.

however, encountered unmediated) are not. Such awareness also entails the understanding that the past is not transparent to us; all evidence (whether manuscript or inscription, fossilized pollen or the light from a distant star) is mediated, perceived and analyzed from the point of view of a particular actor, instrument, or interpreter. Hence the “something” a postmodern historian encounters in research – whether termed facts, data, experience, or meaning – is fragmentary, heterogeneous, discontinuous, partial, and always interpreted and interpretable.

Where these accounts of the so-called linguistic turn have departed from each other is in their descriptions of what comes “beyond” it. Describing recent fears that the linguistic turn, somewhat illogically, both makes “culture” deterministic (the world becomes a set of symbols that determines individuals) and yet deprives historians of an “objective” past (there is “no there there” beyond the symbols), they depict and seemingly applaud a turn to something else. But what? Some think they see a turn to narrative, even mega-narrative; others see rather a retreat to microhistory. Some cling to unmediated “experience”; others predict a “revitalized and transformed . . . objectivity.”<sup>10</sup> For some, what we have now is a material turn – recourse to “the primacy of the object.” For others, the new turn is psychological.<sup>11</sup> For yet others, the turn is

10 Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacobs, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994), 237.

11 See Patrick Joyce, ed., *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 14, as well as note 27 below. For what some might call a psychological turn, see Rebecca Spang, “Para-

historical, although at least one surveyor of the contemporary scene treats the linguistic turn itself, not the retreat from it, as a sort of historical turn.<sup>12</sup>

Probably the most common description of the retreat characterizes it as a return to social history; but a number hedge their bets by seeing it as a kind of eclecticism of method, a “bricolage,” or what Gabrielle Spiegel, in a recent volume devoted to the turn from the turn, calls “practice theory” (about which designation she is noticeably unenthusiastic).<sup>13</sup> It thus seems clear that, for all the unease the theorists of theory articulate concerning certain understandings of where history was a decade ago, there is in fact no new theory of theory that has swept the field – or even commanded much attention from professional historians. And this leads me to a second point.

The amount of theorizing about theory – that is, descriptions of the linguistic turn and what lies beyond it – is actually quite limited. A good deal of it has been done by a small group of essayists, many of whom are not practicing historians. In the volume *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (1999), edited by a historian and a sociologist, almost half of the essays were written by sociologists, political scientists, or those with joint appointments in several of the social sciences.

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digms and Paranoia: How Modern Is the French Revolution?” review essay, *The American Historical Review* 108 (1) (2003): 119 – 147, especially 127 – 129.

12 Ronald Grigor Suny, “Back and Beyond: Reversing the Cultural Turn?” in “Review Essays: Beyond the Cultural Turn,” *The American Historical Review* 107 (5) (2002): 1476 – 1499, especially 1482.

13 Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Introduction,” in *Practicing History*, ed. Spiegel, 22 – 26.

When the *American Historical Review* devoted a Forum essay in 2002 to a review of the volume, it commissioned pieces from, respectively, an anthropologist, a political scientist, and a literary critic. *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (2005), edited by Gabrielle Spiegel, is composed of essays by four sociologists, four historians, two anthropologists, and a professor of English. (Several of the authors, admirably, wear more than one hat.) There is nothing particularly worrisome about those who are not professional historians theorizing history, of course. As postmodernism would have it, a kaleidoscope of views can only help. But one notes in reading these essays that they often generalize about what historians are doing, without giving any examples of historical writing. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that articles about the turning and re-turning in which historians are said currently to be engaged may not be the best place to go to see what's happening in history.

I have thus decided to turn for evidence to the last ten years of the *American Historical Review* (*AHR*), not only its articles, review articles, and Forum discussions, but also, to the extent possible, a sample of the books reviewed. One might of course argue that the *AHR*, especially under the leadership of Michael Grossberg, its editor from 1995 – 2005, was not typical of the historical profession in the United States, since the journal strove to foster work the Association thought of as broad-ranging, comparative, and interdisciplinary, and also endeavored to broaden its base of contributors in terms of gender, ethnicity, field studied, and type of institution represented. If one is trying to discern what the new directions in scholarship are, this is not, however, a disadvantage.

A survey of recent work in the *AHR* and elsewhere<sup>14</sup> suggests to me that much of the most subtle and energetic recent historical writing has absorbed what is thought-provoking and innovative about the linguistic turn. To be sure, there is a certain amount of what one might call labeling rather than leveraging. We have all read too many pieces in the last twenty years in which Geertz is cited to convince us there is culture, or Foucault mentioned as if his point were that everything reduces to power. The anxious decorating of footnotes with labels is, however, nothing new; Max Weber, for example, used to be – and sometimes still is – cited at any mention of bureaucracy or charisma. Moreover, some recent articles may, to some tastes, go on at unnecessary length about theories, especially about theories not utilized. Nonetheless, when one reads Priya Satia on how the British understanding of the area they knew as “Arabia” influenced military policy in Iraq just after World War I; Sarah Knott on the differently gendered ideals of “sensibility” found on two sides of the Atlantic during the Revolutionary War; Gadi Algazi on rituals between medieval lords and peasants that articulated mutual but asymmetrical obligations, always filtered through remembering; or Andrew Zimmerman on how an identity constructed for peasants in German Togo on the model of American self-help became a trap, and not only be-

14 To *The American Historical Review* I add a survey of recent issues of *History and Theory* and, of course, my reading, a large part of it written by Europeans, in my own field of European history. I am also influenced by my review over the past five years of an average of three hundred applications a year for memberships in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

cause of disregard of ecological conditions, one is in the presence of theorized historical analysis in which lives, in their suffering and their fullness, are glimpsed through the always-fragmentary and interpretable texts and objects that mediate them to us.<sup>15</sup> When one reads Brooke Holmes on the ways in which ancient Greek discussions of the symptoms of illness take us into a place where a new understanding was being formulated of what it means to be in, and to be, a body, one encounters historical writing that delivers what, in my judgment, history should always strive to do: tell us something of the difference between the past and the present while remaining aware that the present descends from the past and that their differences cannot have been so great as to render all our language useless.<sup>16</sup>

In this writing, theory is not merely present; it enables insights of sophis-

15 Priya Satia, "The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia," *The American Historical Review* 111 (1) (2006): 16–51; Sarah Knott, "Sensibility and the American War for Independence," *The American Historical Review* 109 (1) (2004): 19–40; Gadi Algazi, "Lords Ask, Peasants Answer: Making Traditions in Late Medieval Village Assemblies," in *Between History and Histories: The Making of Silence and Commemoration*, ed. Gerald Sider and Gavin Smith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 199–229; and Andrew Zimmerman, "A German Alabama in Africa: The Tuskegee Expedition to German Togo and the Transnational Origins of West African Cotton Growers," *The American Historical Review* 110 (5) (2005): 1362–1398.

16 Brooke Holmes, "Medical Analogy and Ethical Subjectivity in Plato," in *When Worlds Elide*, ed. J. P. Euben and Karen Bassi (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming), and "Medical Knowledge and Technology," in *A Cultural History of the Human Body, Volume 1: Ancient Greece to Early Christianity*, ed. Daniel H. Garrison (Oxford: Berg Publishers, forthcoming).

tication and subtlety, and its authors tell us quite explicitly how it does this. Such work seems to me both more grounded in the evidence it explores and more nuanced in its understanding of genre, symbol, and idea than some of the sterile opposing of text to experience that characterized the early 1990s. In my own area of medieval religious history, for example, the previous two decades saw futile and sometimes acrimonious debate by German scholars about whether women "really" saw visions or scribes simply "made up" visionary accounts because the genre expected them; in contrast, recent work, such as that of Dyan Elliott, Nancy Caciola, and Barbara Newman, understands, without needing to belabor the point, that scholars have no direct access to the experience of visionaries, but that the presence of expectations of their behavior on the part of those, male and female, who wrote about them is evidence about their lives and not merely an opportunity for us to read and interpret.<sup>17</sup>

There are, to be sure, both new emphases and new buzz words, and these can be understood in part as a response to, even a departure from, some of the scholarship inspired by the linguistic turn. Explorations, and assertions, of agency – a buzz word very popular in article titles over the past two decades – are reactions to a fear that analysis of the constituents of culture eclipses

17 Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Dyan Elliott, *Proving Women: Female Spirituality and Inquisitorial Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Barbara Newman, "What Did It Mean to Say 'I Saw'? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture," *Speculum* 80 (1) (2005): 1–43.

individual action and responsibility.<sup>18</sup> A recent tendency to talk of transitions rather than epistemes or paradigm shifts reflects a determination to pay more attention to how cultures move from one set of dominant symbols to another – in other words, to what is always for a historian the fundamental challenge: explaining change. Moreover, recent historical writing is clearly going in some directions that seem to be reactions to, even implicit rejections of, a cultural or linguistic turn. I now consider some of them – without, however, suggesting that any is truly “beyond” the cultural.

There are two very different ways in which historical work of the last decade may be seen as a retreat from the textual: the renewed interest in material culture and physical objects, on the one hand, and, on the other, a new enthusiasm for what one might call deep structures, represented both by an upsurge of so-called “big” or “deep” history and by a renewed recourse to sociobiological and cognitive explanations for human behavior. To take the latter first, there has recently been a flurry of interest in what one might call “really big” or “really long” history, some of which attempts to trump mere “world history” by going all the way back to the big bang.<sup>19</sup> Dan-

iel Lord Smail, in a recent *AHR* article, for example, proposed taking the story of human origins back to the emergence of *homo sapiens* in Africa rather than to the emergence of writing in Mesopotamia, his argument being that the latter narrative instantiates a Judeo-Christian perspective on world history.<sup>20</sup> David Christian and Fred Spier tout even bigger history. Even if it does not place the roots of history in astronomical events, such interpretation sees the evolution and extinction of species, the drift of continents, climate change, volcanic eruptions, and disease as more important for understanding the course of human development than short-term events such as wars, treaties, or elections; as such it not only provides a provocative counter to traditional political narratives, but also ascribes genuinely new causes for events historians thought they had long understood.<sup>21</sup>

18 See Spiegel, “Introduction,” in *Practicing History*, ed. Spiegel, 11 – 18. One should also note that some now see agency as the importation of constraining nineteenth-century liberal categories; Cornelia Hughes Dayton, “Rethinking Agency, Recovering Voices,” *The American Historical Review* 109 (3) (2004): 827 – 843. Rebecca J. Scott, “Small-Scale Dynamics of Large-Scale Processes,” in “AHR Forum: Crossing Slavery’s Boundaries,” *The American Historical Review* 105 (2) (2000): 473, dubs the concept “a little shop-worn.”

19 Fred Spier, *The Structure of Big History from the Big Bang until Today* (Amsterdam: Amster-

dam University Press, 1996); David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). See also “The Return of Science: Evolutionary Ideas and History,” special issue, *History and Theory* 38 (1999), and Gale Stokes, “The Fate of Human Societies: A Review of Recent Macrohistories,” *The American Historical Review* 106 (2) (2001): 508 – 525.

20 Dan Smail, “In the Grip of Sacred History,” *The American Historical Review* 110 (5) (2005): 1337 – 1361.

21 For example, Michael McCormick, “Rats, Communications and Plague: Toward an Ancient and Medieval Ecological History,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34 (1) (2003): 1 – 25, and Michael McCormick, Paul Edward Dutton, and Paul Mayewski, “Volcanoes and the Climate Forcing of Carolingian Europe, A.D. 750 – 950,” *Speculum* 82 (4) (2007): 865 – 895.

Although such arguments need not – and sometimes do not – draw on deeply embedded psychological, evolutionary, cognitive, or sociobiological structures, they tend to, in part because their accounts frequently rely on repeated historical patterns or have recourse to claims about perduring “human nature.” One sees this in a book such as Robert McElvaine’s *Eve’s Seed* or even the recent work of Jared Diamond.<sup>22</sup> Art historians have been particularly interested in such explanations, whether in the more psychologically reductive work of John Onians, which applies neurobiology to art-making and viewing, or in the more anthropological work of Hans Belting and David Freedberg, which is attempting to tease out non-reductive ways of understanding cross-cultural human responses to the “power of images.”<sup>23</sup> Scholars at work in the relatively new field of the history of the emotions – although they tend to reject theories of universal psychobiological processes which emotion-words reflect – are nonetheless drawn to cognitive science and brain studies,

22 Robert S. McElvaine, *Eve’s Seed: Biology, the Sexes, and the Course of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001); Jared M. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 2005). For an argument against the invasion of literary studies by cognitive and neuroscience, see Raymond Tallis, “License my roving hands: Does neuroscience really have anything to teach us about the pleasure of reading John Donne?” Commentary, *The Times Literary Supplement*, April 11, 2008.

23 John Onians, *Neuroarthistory: From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich: W. Fink, 2001); David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, “Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience,” *Trends in Cognitive Science* 11 (5) (2007): 197–203. For reservations, see Robert Suckale’s review of Belting in *Journal für Kunstgeschichte* 11 (4) (2007): 351–360.

arguing that there is something bodily as well as verbal in more than one culture to which the word *anger*, for example, applies.<sup>24</sup>

Searching for deep structures and large patterns seems located at the opposite pole from the postmodern sense of history-writing as fragmentary, fragile, and, so to speak, under perpetual construction. Nonetheless, in the hands of most professional historians, even cognitive science and parallels from the older field of ethology (animal behavior) tend to be used analogously rather than reductively. When Rachel Fulton, for example, understands premodern prayer practice through theories of psychological response and employs parallels between present-day sports and medieval metaphors of spiritual combat, she does not reduce the rituals and experiences we find described in texts to physiological patterns in the brain, just as she does not argue that we have any access to the devotee’s inner feelings. Cognitive structures lie deep below and hence are accessed only through behaviors that differ culturally; analogies are exactly that: analogies not equations.<sup>25</sup> Even “deep history” at its best involves understanding that physical or physiological structures are always mediated through our ways of knowing them, and hence through culture.

A far more pervasive trend – the interest in objects – might also be under-

24 See the sophisticated effort to deal with these issues in William I. Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 12–13, and also in Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

25 Rachel Fulton, “Praying with Anselm at Admont: A Meditation on Practice,” *Speculum* 81 (3) (2006): 700–733.



stood as a flight from postmodern textuality. Material culture, understood as archaeology, has of course been a major element in historical scholarship for almost two centuries, especially for areas of history such as the classics, the ancient Near East, early China, or meso-America, for all of which textual evidence is scanty or lacking. Since the 1970s, however, it has not only become more important in fields such as the European Middle Ages, for which it was formerly less used, but has also expanded significantly beyond the excavation and dating of human-made objects to the use of new techniques and the posing of more wide-ranging cultural questions.<sup>26</sup> Dendrochronology, for example, is now used to date architecture and devotional objects as well as settlement locations; zooarchaeological evidence sheds new light on diet (animal and human) and hence on the movement of peoples; analysis of glacial ice to determine mineralogical emissions at far distant sites reveals new facts about mining techniques and hence radically new conclusions about the technological sophistication of cultures whose texts talk little about technology.

Material culture has also come to include museum studies, as it does in Randolph Starn's *AHR* review essay of 2005, or areas such as the history of fashion or domestic interiors, often previously understood as social history. See, for example, Leora Auslander's 2005 article, "Beyond Words." To both Auslander and Starn, objects are understood as having

their own "agency," so to speak; an iron or a typewriter, for example, shapes the roles and experiences of the woman who uses it even as her needs and desires (and the needs and desires of others thrust upon her) shape its creation and use.<sup>27</sup> Indeed both authors tend to oppose the material to the cultural. Starn writes, "It is quite possible to imagine some future version of this Brief Guide suggesting that museum studies had turned – or returned – from the primacy of discourse to the priority of object."<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, it is hard not to notice that the extended example of material culture Auslander gives – a discussion of the reconstitution of domestic interiors by Jewish survivors after the Holocaust – is based on inventories, that is, on texts.

Moreover, as both historians recognize, objects are hardly objective. Neither the statue revered as living by a fourteenth-century peasant, nor the table polished by a nineteenth-century housewife, exists before the viewer as raw material from the past. Not only do we tend to understand that they are significant and why they are significant from texts, but, whether or not they are textually framed, they are not the same stuff they were centuries be-

26 For examples of innovative work in archaeology, see the many works of Colin Renfrew, as well as Stanley H. Ambrose and M. Anne Katzenberg, eds., *Biogeochemical Approaches to Paleodietary Analysis* (New York: Academic Kluwer/Plenum Press, 2000).

27 Randolph Starn, "A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies," *The American Historical Review* 110 (1) (2005): 68–96; Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *The American Historical Review* 110 (4) (2005): 1015–1045. On the agency of objects, see Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–50; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004); and the many works of Bruno Latour.

28 Starn, "A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies," 84.

fore: paint is painted over; varnish deteriorates and changes color; objects (like documents) are forged, reused, and misused.<sup>29</sup> Despite Auslander's title "Beyond Words" or Starn's claim to return to the priority of objects, these essays show not so much a move beyond culture, discourse, or textuality as what one might call a move beyond binaries – to a sense of both text and object as always interpreted and interpretable because they are always imbedded in culture. The study of "the material" is not, it turns out, beyond the cultural turn.

If we look at what today's historians are actually doing, we find that in addition to what is sometimes claimed to be a retreat from the textual, there is another major and multifaceted move that may at first glance seem "beyond" the postmodern. This is the move to stress connections and transitions rather than borders, boundaries, and breaks.

One might, perhaps, put under the rubric of "connections and inclusions rather than boundaries" the tendency of today's scholarship to treat what are known as "identity groups" not as racially or genetically given but as constituted by complex cultural circumstances. The focus is apparent not only in the titles of recent publications, but also in the many courses on, for example, gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, ethnic studies, and postcolonial studies offered in university curricula. To mention only a single example: recently there has been much sophisticated work on ethnogenesis – work which, at least sometimes, asks whether ethnicity is an appropriate category

at all for premodern history.<sup>30</sup> Such new emphases are an obvious and welcome consequence of the turns of the 1980s and 1990s; there is no need for me to underline them here. What I mean by connections and transitions are two trends that are somewhat less apparent, if only because a little more recent.

Once again, I take the second (the stress on transitions) first. Recent historical work can be seen, in some ways, as a retreat from poststructuralist emphasis on paradigm shifts or epistemes – that is, on periods understood to have characteristic cultural configurations, an escape or even transition from which may be hard to discern or explain. One result of such supposed retreat is an attitude we might tag, only slightly in jest, "nothing declines." Current scholarship tends not only to be drawn to classic periods of collapse and deterioration – the end (once the "fall") of the Roman empire now understood as late antiquity or "the birth of Europe," for example – but also to find within such periods both a creativity of their own and the origins of new cultural configurations. Byzantine culture of the middle period, the Ottoman empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, meso-America just before the coming of the Spaniards, late Qing dynasty China, the European Dark Ages (a designation once understood to refer to the seventh to ninth centuries,

29 For astute comments, see Tim Ingold, "Materials against Materiality," *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (1) (2007): 1–16.

30 Florin Curta, "Some Remarks on Ethnicity in Medieval Archaeology," *Early Medieval Europe* 15 (2) (2007): 159–185. Similar questions are, of course, asked about race and sexual orientation: see Barbara J. Fields, "Of Rogues and Geldings," in "AHR Forum: Amalgamation and the Historical Distinctiveness of the United States," *The American Historical Review* 108 (5) (2003): 1397–1405; and Ruth Mazo Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities," review essay, *The American Historical Review* 105 (4) (2000): 1250–1265.

then shifted to the tenth and eleventh centuries, now run off the stage entirely): such periods are often analyzed to find creativity percolating under a surface appearance of stagnation.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the existence of radical and abrupt shifts in values, cultural forms, social arrangements, and political power tends to be suspect to today's historians; "revolutions" are denied across a wide swatch of history. Not only political revolutions, such as the French and American, or religious upheavals, such as "the Reformation(s) of the sixteenth century," but also cultural breakthroughs, such as the scientific revolution, or social and military reconfigurations, such as the feudal revolution, are vigorously questioned by a large body of current historical analysis.<sup>32</sup> Several recent articles on topics ranging from plague in fourteenth-century Europe to the breakup of the Soviet Union assert in their titles the end of paradigms.<sup>33</sup>

31 For one example, see Joanna Waley-Cohen, "The New Qing History," *Radical History Review* 88 (Winter 2004): 193–206.

32 See, for example, Spang, "Paradigms and Paranoia"; Thomas N. Bisson, "The Feudal Revolution," *Past and Present* 142 (1994): 6–42, with responses by Dominique Barthélemy, Stephen D. White, Timothy Reuter, and Chris Wickham in *Past and Present* 152 (1996): 196–223, and 155 (1997): 177–225; Margaret J. Osler, ed., *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Stephen Gaukroger, *Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1210–1685* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006). A related example is Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *The American Historical Review* 105 (3) (2000): 807–831, which rejects the twentieth century as a natural unit.

33 For example, Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., "The Black Death: End of a Paradigm," *The Ameri-*

Driven by many impulses and circumstances, such a new interpretative focus clearly owes something to discontent with what is perceived to be a postmodern sense of the fragmentary and discontinuous, as well as what is perceived to be a poststructuralist understanding of discourse as a set of cultural symbols and practices so powerful that change within them is difficult to conceptualize or account for. At a deeper level, however, analyses that stress transition rather than rupture draw on many postmodern techniques for tracing the genealogy of concepts, institutions, attitudes, assumptions, and actions. For example, what it means for a text to be "new" or a ritual to be "traditional" has become a far more complex question now that genre, audience, the circumstances of composition or transcription, and the complexities of reception (including long-term reception) are understood to be intrinsic to discourse.<sup>34</sup> Rather than a retreat from the poststructural, the current tendency to stress transition, continuation, cultural borrowing, and the construction of identities and paradigms by the historians who employ them is at least as much an extrapolation from the theoretical moves of the 1980s and 1990s as an effort to overcome the limitations of those moves.

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*can Historical Review* 107 (3) (2002): 703–738; Mark von Hagen, "Empires, Borderlands and Diasporas: Eurasia as Anti-Paradigm for the Post-Soviet Era," *The American Historical Review* 109 (2) (2004): 445–468.

34 See, for example, Daniel Hobbins, "The Schoolman as Public Intellectual: Jean Gerson and the Late Medieval Tract," *The American Historical Review* 108 (5) (2003): 1308–1337; Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

When one surveys recent *AHR* articles, the books on new acquisitions shelves in scholarly libraries, and the job advertisements in *The American Historical Association's Perspectives*, the most striking contemporary emphasis is on what I am calling *connections*, described in 2006 by C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Isabel Hofmeyr, and others as “movement, flow, circulation” and as long ago as 1999 in the *Journal of American History* as “transnational” currents.<sup>35</sup> The most graphic illustration of this might appear to be the recent trend toward study of bodies of water as connecting, rather than land masses as sites of boundaries and division (geographical as well as political): the Mediterranean history, North Atlantic history, Pacific Rim history, Indian Ocean history, and South China Sea history, for example, surveyed in a recent issue of the *AHR* under the title “Oceans

35 C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *The American Historical Review* 111 (5) (2006): 1441–1464. The move has been from histories devoted to explaining Western exceptionalism (for example, David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some are so Rich and Some so Poor* [New York: Norton, 1998]; Alfred W. Crosby, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250–1600* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997]) to a comparative world history approach (R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997]; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China and the Making of the Modern World Economy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000]) to so-called transnational history, which stresses what I call here (following Horden and Purcell) *connectivity*. See also “AHR Forum: Oceans of History,” *The American Historical Review* 111 (3) (2006): 717–780 and two special issues of *The Journal of American History* on transnational history, 86 (2–3) (1999).

of History.”<sup>36</sup> But the trend cuts deeper. For even land masses are, in current research, treated as sites of connectivity and mutual influence. Rather than the older world history or global history, understood as a comparison of given units (whether regions, nation-states, or empires), the new emphasis on connectivity, which one recent symposium perceptively labeled *entanglement*, seeks places below the surface of borders and boundaries where economic and cultural connections and mutual influences flourish. Welcomed by some as an end to the area-studies mentality,<sup>37</sup> such work emphasizes diasporas, mobility, diversity, cultural borrowing, and the porousness of borders, and as such, clearly owes something to an actual opening up of boundaries since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of China (however partial) to the West.

Although any new emphasis tends, alas, to bring with it its own buzz words, the stress on connectivity at its best (as in Mark von Hagen’s 2004 article on Eurasia as “anti-paradigm”) is an effort to break down tenacious older dichoto-

36 In this regard, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) – a critique of Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols., trans. S. Reynolds (London: Collins, 1972–1973) that owes much to it – has been powerfully influential. So much is this the case that there is now a project at the University of Munich on “the East Asian ‘Mediterranean,’” sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation and directed by Dr. Angela Scottenhammer.

37 See Gregory Mann, “Locating Colonial Histories: Between France and West Africa,” *The American Historical Review* 110 (2) (2005): 409–434, and xv for the editor’s comment on that essay. And see “AHR Forum: Entangled Empires in the Atlantic World,” *The American Historical Review* 112 (3) (2007): 710–799.

mies, such as Occident (in this case Russia) versus Orient. As Matthew Connelly comments, “[B]inaries are on the run,” a trend all the more surprising (yet perhaps, for academic culture, predictable) given the stark dichotomies in the political and polemical world since 9/11.<sup>38</sup> For all its broad sweep, its rejection of abrupt shifts, and its stress on economic and geographical factors – which might seem anti- or non-postmodern – the new “entangled” history is inconceivable without a postmodern understanding that all units (whether geographical or cultural), like all exchanges (whether of values, social structures, objects, or DNA), are mediated by categories constituted by the historians who study them, as well as by the people who create them in their ever-changing variety. Thus, in the new emphases I have chronicled here – on connectivity, transitions, material culture, objects, even in the best of the work that employs and queries “deep structures” – there seems to be a recognition that, pace the theorists of “turns,” for the historian there can be no “beyond” culture.<sup>39</sup>

Hence, as I said at the beginning of this essay, the apocalyptic tone of the mid-1990s seems to have been misplaced. The writing of history is stronger and far more sophisticated than in 1995 and, as I have tried to show, this owes more to the absorption than to the rejecting of the so-called linguistic or cultural turn. Yet those of us who teach in American universities know that there is a crisis today. It is a crisis

not of the substance of historical and humanistic study, but rather of professional practice and formation, a crisis that goes to the heart of what we value as scholars at least as much as did the “culture wars” of the 1990s. It affects all practicing historians, but especially the young, and tends to be expressed in language similar to the cries of anxiety, even fear, that characterized the essays in the 1997 volume *What's Happened to the Humanities?* Indeed, there is no exaggeration involved in applying terms such as *alarm* and *despair* to the attitudes of PhD recipients currently emerging onto the job market and to the approach of their mentors and professors. Stories abound of graduate students who fail to find jobs because their topics are not “trendy,” of books that fail to find publishers because of “the decline of the monograph,” of assistant professors who fail to gain tenure because they do not complete that ominously titled “second project.” Mentors respond with exhortations to the young to produce ever more rapidly, while purveying alarmist tales of decreasing venues for publication and proliferating barriers to career advancement. The apocalyptic has gravitated, it seems, from the scholarly to the professional sphere.

Although statistics are notoriously useless in quelling fear, it is worth noting that statistics do not bear out such apocalyptic descriptions. As recent reports on publishing conclude, the monograph is still the key to humanities publishing; there has even been a modest increase in history publishing in the past few years, with a minimal increase in price.<sup>40</sup> New journals are constantly appearing, and e-publishing provides

38 Matthew Connelly, in “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” 1452.

39 As Richard Handler argues in “Cultural Theory in History Today,” in “Review Essays: Beyond the Cultural Turn,” *The American Historical Review* 107 (5) (2002): 1513–1520.

40 Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoIVD.aspx#topIV12>: Part IV. *Indicator IV-*

many new outlets. Despite a disturbing increase in the number of people in adjunct or part-time positions who would prefer full-time employment, and an alarming tendency for women to suffer salary discrimination at later points in their careers and at elite institutions, the market for entering professionals looks good. About seven hundred PhD recipients gain jobs in history departments every year; most candidates in tenure-track positions acquire tenure; and the proportion of recently tenured historians who have published books is very high.<sup>41</sup>

The fear that lurks behind the scare stories propagated by graduate students and assistant professors to each other rests less in demonstrable trends than in rumors; but it rests above all in pressure to publish at an increasing rate inflicted on younger professionals by deans, department chairs, tenure committees, and senior colleagues. Pushed to speed up production beyond what is humanly possible and in ways that have the potential to injure scholarly excel-

lence, even scholarly integrity, many candidates for tenure publish every chapter of their first monograph as a journal article, scramble to orchestrate an edited volume, to which all their friends contribute, in order to have a “second book” fast, and choose new research topics of a reach and apparently contemporary relevance that they are not fully equipped to pursue. Moreover, the pressures creep, insidiously and steadily, up the professional ladder to affect even tenured and mid-career professors. Frenzy for production then leads to a duplication of publishing that wastes paper; a frantic search for sellable, often trendy, and sometimes overly general topics that will be snatched up by publishers; and, most dangerously, to a deferral of creativity. For such frenzy defers the time necessary for finding genuinely new (and by definition un-trendy) topics, for editing long and hitherto unknown texts, for returning to the archives for research radically different from one’s earlier forays there, for the painful re-writing and rethinking necessary for true innovation; it may postpone discovery and intellectual adventure so long that historians no longer remember the courage and curiosity that motivated their vocations in the first place.

I have no facile or immediate solution to such pressures, rumors, and fears. But since the problem appears to lie less in impersonal market factors than in the culture of the academy, I propose that what we need above all is a new understanding of what we are about as historians. To describe such an understanding is not, of course, to list a set of concrete proposals. But to outline proposals would be to write another essay and might in any case contribute to the impression, which I am attempting to counter (at least for the United States)

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12: *Academic Publishing* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008). And see Patrick Manning, “Gutenberg-e: Electronic Entry to the Historical Professoriate,” *The American Historical Review* 109 (5) (2004): 1505–1526, for a somewhat less positive assessment.

41 See Manning, “Gutenberg-e,” 1513; Thomas Bender et al., *The Education of Historians for the Twenty-First Century* (Urbana: Published for the American Historical Association by the University of Illinois Press, 2004), 27; Robert Townsend, “History and the Future of Scholarly Publishing,” *Perspectives* 41 (7) (2003); Francis Oakley, “Ignorant Armies and Nighttime Clashes: Changes in the Humanities Classroom, 1970–1995,” in *What’s Happened to the Humanities?*, 67; and Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoIII.aspx>: Part III. *The Humanities Workforce*.

that current professional anxieties are owing primarily to economic or institutional forces.<sup>42</sup> Instead, I hope that articulating a new self-understanding will encourage all historians, but especially the young (and their mentors on their behalf), to resist both the rumors of alarm and the pressures of speed-up. And I suggest that embracing this self-understanding will be easier for all of us if we note that it is based in where we actually are in the substance of our work as scholars.

Hence I propose that we adopt toward professional practices the same postmodern stance that has facilitated creative new work in the substance of our scholarship. For if we could really understand what we undertake as historians to be by definition partial and discontinuous, forever redone and in need of redoing because of our own cultural situated-ness, we – all of us, young scholars and old – would be able to slow down. If there is no goal at the end of the race – that is, if the point is the running not the goal – why sprint instead of stroll (especially if sprinting damages our knees forever)? No longer pressured to read everything, consider everything, account for every new turn and twist of scholarship, we would recognize that each of us is – and can be – only one perspective. Accepting the fragmentary and necessarily partial nature of our own contribution, we might become more truly collaborative – that is, more open to using, even seeking out, work different from our own. Instead

42 To say this is not to deny the deleterious effects that government-imposed standards and requirements can have. An example is the academic assessment procedures imposed in the United Kingdom. Awareness of such pressures, however, makes it all the more important that scholars resist rather than exaggerate or collude with them.

of scrambling to compile ever more collections of essays on predictable topics in some false hope of “covering” a topic, or commissioning essays from different fields that talk past each other while claiming an “interdisciplinarity” that fails to recognize the radically different languages and techniques necessary from one expertise to another, we might relax into true collaboration, which is above all predicated on listening.

I do not mean by this to extol simply the recognition that historical interpretations are forever remade as generations change; historians have known that for a long time. Nor do I mean simply to point out that our accounts are constructed. I mean something more radical and more postmodern – something I have elsewhere called “history in the comic mode.”<sup>43</sup> I propose a recognition that every stance is by definition on the margins, that every story or analysis has of necessity an arbitrarily imposed ending or conclusion, that there can be no so-called meta-narrative (that is, a narrative for something simply referred to as “us”), but that there is no shame in any choice of subject, as long as it is made with methodological self-awareness and attention to a range of relevant evidence, none of it treated as transparent.

After all, it will probably always be true that one person’s buzz word is another person’s discovery; one person’s “over-theorizing” is another person’s methodological self-scrutiny; one person’s “under-theorizing” is another’s

43 Caroline Walker Bynum, “In Praise of Fragments: History in the Comic Mode,” in Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 11–26. See also Bynum, “The P Word,” *Perspectives* 45 (7) (2007): 58.

archival research. But awareness that we all write from a particular perspective and with the aid of specific methods and interpretations does not mean that there is no difference between good and bad arguments; opposing the transparency of evidence – whether objects or texts – does not mean opposing evidence. Indeed, exactly the opposite is true. More attention to the complex and indirect ways in which evidence renders up the past leads to more attention to the cogency and accuracy of argument. But paying more attention means taking more time. What I suggest is that an enthusiastic acceptance (instead of a grim fear) that each of us writes from a partial perspective might free us from the pressures of speed-up and over-production. Hence an acceptance of our postmodern partiality might accord us more time to make our partial arguments well.

If I am right in this seemingly odd vision that connects the postmodern to the modest, then a recognition that we are not beyond the cultural turn might lead us not only to embrace fully the achievements of the past decade but also free new generations from pressures that may inhibit the achievements of the decades to come.



# Anthony Grafton

## *Apocalypse in the stacks? The research library in the age of Google*

Research libraries take up a vast amount of physical and psychic space. They inhabit spectacular buildings, old and new, which occupy prime real estate in cities and on campuses. They mount costly, splendid exhibitions of everything from ancient manuscripts to 1960s comic books. Every external clue suggests that they matter deeply, both to individuals and to institutions with deep pockets. And the story told by the buildings is confirmed and enriched by their collections.

American research libraries are the envy of the world: for complex historical reasons, our monoglot and often xenophobic society has created some of the biggest and most cosmopolitan collections of texts of every kind the world has ever known. Do you want

to pore over incunabula? You can find thousands of them in the Northeast at Harvard's multiple libraries; in Washington, D.C., at the Library of Congress; in the Southwest at the Huntington Library; and dozens of points between. Care for Tibetan religion? Your best bet is Bloomington, Indiana. The manuscripts of James Joyce? Shuffle off to Buffalo. General collections are in some ways even more amazing. Anyone who has done research in the greatest European libraries – libraries whose collections of manuscripts and rare books dwarf American ones – knows that not one of them offers an open-stack collection of books and periodicals from the last two centuries to rival the top ten or twelve university libraries in North America. The American model – easy to enter and simple to use, powered by vast resources and vaster ambitions – has played a major role in the current dominance around the world of English-language scholarship.

Yet the styles of our great libraries vary radically, and meaningfully, and even the quickest look at the contrast reveals that they are more labile institutions than they seem. Behind the glorious facades, a strange kind of war is being waged: a war between styles of repository, reading, and research.

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Older libraries – the New York and Boston Public Libraries, Beinecke at Yale, Butler at Columbia, Widener at Harvard – and newer ones in the traditional style, like the Chicago Public Library and the new library of Rhodes College in Memphis, proclaim their allegiance to ancient cultural traditions. The names of dead white male authors, incised in stone, parade across their facades. Columns, pilasters, Gothic curlicues, and Roman triumphal arches reinforce the sense of solidity, history, allegiance to an older world. So, even more, do their contents: the endless rows of books, their spines appealingly faded but still colorful, which march down the equally endless Borgesian labyrinths of their stacks.

Newer libraries, by contrast, scream their modernity. In Seattle and Salt Lake City, glass curtain walls surround vast open spaces. Gleaming banks of computers seem to be everywhere: books, not so much. The lofty atria are redolent not with the noble rot of ancient leather and buckram, but with the coffee and fresh baked goods on offer in their cafés, whose glitz has supplanted the seedy glamour of old-fashioned reading rooms. These newer libraries are cast in a radically different formal language, one that speaks not of books, but of information: pellets of useable data, as smooth, precise, and indistinguishable as the computer screens themselves.

To many observers, perhaps most, these contrasting aesthetics embody radically different visions of what a library is and does. On the one hand, there is the traditional citadel of manuscript and print, closed and guarded, a hierarchical structure as neatly ordered as a vast set of display cabinets for butterflies. Its expert librarians pin every document, book, and journal in the collection to its proper place, the

precise category in which equally expert researchers will be sure to find it. They and their bosses assume that true knowledge exists between the covers of books and journals – those books and journals that have an acknowledged place in the world of scholarship. On the other hand, there is the gleaming spaceport of the information age, open and accessible, a vast docking station with thousands of airlocks, material and virtual. These give access, for anyone who cares to settle at one of them, to the vast buzz and bubble of electronic information. The funders and designers of these hypermodern libraries believe that the Web does a better job of finding and sorting information than old-fashioned methods of classification can. They invite users to click on a link and plunge into the virtual world, using a search engine rather than a formal catalog to find what they need. Crumbling leather and frowning curators confront Google and Wikipedia; Gormenghast duels with Starbuck's. Right now, Starbuck's seems to be winning.

These contrasting visions are stereotypes, of course: real libraries do not split neatly into reactionary temples of leather and vellum and hip, accessible banks of humming computers – though many journalists, even a few librarians, write and speak as if they did. The state-liest of paneled library halls gleam with rows of computer screens, and the glitziest of pseudo-malls still contain thousands and thousands of books. But stereotypes matter even when they don't match the facts. They frame much current thinking and writing about libraries, and they render public discussion, and the decision-making based on it, less productive than it should be. The ground is really trembling under the

great libraries; everything about them, from the form of books to the ways of readers, is changing rapidly. But there are more things in heaven and earth than most of those who write about – or build – libraries seem to realize.

Most of the recent public discussion, especially in mainstream magazines, has concerned the rise of electronic media – and with good reason. One of the main things libraries now do for their readers – and one of the main things library budgets now pay for – is the mass of electronic media that has come into existence in the last twenty years. Media available to anyone – Wikipedia, the Google Books project, Worldcat, Perseus – have given the man on the Clapham omnibus and his counterpart, the woman in the Richmond Internet café, immediate access to a vast range of material, as diverse in quality as in kind: cutting-edge definitions of mathematical terminology and hundred-year-old articles on historical problems; first editions of rare books from the nineteenth century and uncritical, unreliable editions of classics from the Renaissance. The Google Library Project and Google Book Search – closely related projects, still in their infancy – have already transformed the working life of anyone who does serious humanistic research, especially at schools, colleges, and universities that cannot afford large libraries of their own. The occasional sight of a scanner's finger or other body parts in a Google Books image detracts little from the greatness of what this remarkable company has already wrought. Sit in a café nowadays and you can compare not only weed whackers and auto insurance policies, but also multiple editions of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* or Goethe's *Faust*. One thing libraries try to do, accordingly, is offer enough fast computers and

efficient enough WiFi that many visitors will choose to do their Web research in the library, rather than in the attractive alternatives outside it.

Media available to libraries through purchase offer more: they can display texts whose originals are guarded by copyright restrictions or housed, because of age and fragility, in rare book collections – and in a polished visual and technical form far superior to what Google can offer. JSTOR and Project Muse give the reader instant command of a century's worth of journal articles in the humanities and social sciences; EEBO and ECO provide full-text access to tens of thousands of books, many of them searchable; Alexander Street offers immigrant diaries and letters, narratives of the 1960s, searchable data on more than four million Civil War soldiers, and *Harper's Magazine* from 1857 to 1912 – all grain for the mills of generations of thesis writers. Publishers offer more and more books in electronic, as well as paper, form, and university libraries find that their clientele are happy to use these virtual books. This last shift yields some savings in purchase prices, not to mention binding, shelving, and preservation costs. Even the latest scholarship is now available on screen. More and more academic journals offer (to paid subscribers) their current and past issues in electronic format, which many academic readers prefer. Audio and video media proliferate as well – and immediately become indispensable.

Every major library does its best to choose the right array of for-pay media for its particular set of readers and list those media in an efficient, user-friendly way. Within living memory, library catalogs were dull, monochrome printed records of strictly print media, on cards. Somehow they have blossomed into col-

*The research library in the age of Google*

orful, multilayered guides to sources of many different kinds, including books – for many of which they provide thumbnail images of dust jackets in living color. They are just the sort of virtual Virgils that students who arrive at college equipped with laptops, iPhones, and iPods may be willing to follow into the Web’s vast heaven and hell of information. It’s an astonishing achievement.

Yet this efflorescence of electronic media on every library’s website comes at a price. Some of the suppliers of electronic texts and databases – JSTOR, MUSE, and Alexander Street, for example – willingly cut bargains with poorer institutions, supplying the materials most urgently needed at a fraction of what complete subscriptions would cost. Others are less generous. Journal publishers, which often began by offering free electronic access to institutional subscribers, now tend to sell separate electronic subscriptions, for which they charge as much as for print. In 2007, Oxford University Press, for example, listed print and online subscriptions to the historical journal *Past & Present* at \$245 for institutions in the United States. Institutions that wanted the journal in print or online only paid \$234 – no great savings there. A few years ago, Stanford University’s library system considered moving all of its subscriptions to journals published by Elsevier, the world’s largest publisher in the sciences, to electronic form, only to discover that the price would be 90 percent of that for the printed journals, and that the cost would actually rise if individual subscriptions were canceled.

More important still, the money for electronic acquisitions and the computers and WiFi systems needed to access them comes not from pots of fairy gold, but from the budgets once devoted to acquiring books and periodicals. Similarly, the expert time required to choose

among the thousands of available databases, add links to library web pages, and guide faculty and students must be provided by a staff that is often declining in numbers. The brilliant constellation of databases that dazzles any user of a modern library home page is a cost center as well as an asset, one that takes up something like a third of any major library’s budget.

This would not be so severe a problem if the printed book and journal were really the media equivalent of the whooping crane, delicate and doomed. In fact, print is booming. Print-on-demand technology has brought production costs down, and Web-based marketing has made it possible to locate buyers for books of very limited interest. Thanks to these conditions, the number of new books published in various ways is actually rising from one year to the next, even as the prophets proclaim their disappearance. According to R.R. Bowker, a major source of bibliographic information, American publishers brought out 276,649 new titles and editions in 2007, as compared with 274,416 in 2006. This increase is small, though the total is staggering enough in itself. Meanwhile, the number of “on-demand” and short-run books rose from 22,000 to 134,773, making the projected grand total for 2007 411,422. American university presses alone are responsible for around 15,000 new titles a year.

Every research library tries to offer its readers a well-chosen slice of this enormous pie. But the logistics and economics of doing so are extraordinarily demanding. Library budgets have long been under strain. Journal prices have risen, sometimes to stunning heights: Elsevier charges more than \$24,000 for a year’s subscription to one journal,

*Brain Science*. Over time, the libraries that once offered comprehensive journal collections to faculty in all disciplines have had to drop many of their subscriptions, sometimes for journals of interest to many professors. Even so, costs for the subscriptions that remain have risen so rapidly that little room is left for maneuver. As the number of new books continues to increase, the proportion of library resources available for buying them diminishes. Research libraries, most of which now spend in the vicinity of 40 percent of their budgets on monographs, can no longer purchase all of the offerings from serious academic presses in North America. Take into account the growth in publication overseas, not only in Britain but in the Euro zone and in Asia, as well as the fluctuations of exchange rates in recent years, and the financial problems come into focus.

Tight though the financial constraints have become, libraries still buy far more material than they can make available in the stacks. Every year, tons of books enter every major collection: more than a mile's worth of new printed matter at Princeton's Firestone Library; a staggering 5.2 kilometers at Oxford's Bodleian. Finite libraries must find resources and space not only for the virtual resources on their web pages, but also for these very heavy, material books, each of which must be checked in, cataloged, and put in place. The new books enter the collection like a massive paper pile driver. Compact shelving can hold them at bay for a time; but in the end, floors can support only so many books, and campuses have only so much room for library additions.

Almost everywhere, librarians must choose between two unsatisfactory possibilities. One can move the older, rarer books that are often the glory of a re-

search collection into offsite storage, in order to make room for the ephemera of hyperspecialized contemporary scholarship. Or one can store the new books – which are, in fact, the likeliest to be used, especially by students, and represent current developments in old fields and rising new ones – while the holdings in the stacks gradually fall out of date and gather dust. In either case, browsing will become less and less rewarding over time.

This pressure seems very unlikely to abate. Collections grow in a lumpy, uneven way, hard to predict and impossible to control. But one rule of academic life in the humanities persists: to win tenure at a college or university that sees itself as setting high standards, one must normally publish a book – even if it will find three hundred or fewer buyers, and still fewer readers. At the least, one must publish articles in refereed journals. So long as this system prevails (and despite the noble efforts of the Modern Language Association leadership a few years ago to modify it, it stands intact) books and articles will continue to be written. Holdings in most subject areas, accordingly, will grow, and parts of them will have to be moved, pushing one another around the library.

The vast American open-stack collections functioned, historically, not only as repositories, but as memory theaters for advanced graduate students and faculty. Nowadays the spatial organization of books and journals shifts so often and so quickly that easy browsing has itself passed into the realm of memory. Librarians, in other words, not only have to master an electronic universe that expands with stunning rapidity, but must also manage a print world that continues to dismiss its obituaries as greatly exaggerated.

Many other factors contribute to making the head librarian's life difficult, and at least one of them calls for comment here. The cultural climate within universities – and outside them – has changed. American libraries, over the last century, have built up not only vast general collections of circulating books and periodicals, but also world-class special collections, ranging from the rarest of manuscripts and printed books to materials that were once seen as ephemera but now attract the interest of scholars – children's books, for example. Many fields of scholarship now seen as vital – from art history to East Asian studies – are sustained at numerous universities by specially endowed, separate collections. Traditionally, these collections grew not only piece by piece, but also wholesale, as alumni who bought books or manuscripts gave or sold their collections to their old universities. A shared love of rare books and manuscripts provided an element of continuity in university life and promoted collaboration among librarians, scholars, and alumni. University administrations made clear that they valued these activities, not least for the international prestige that they conveyed: just think of Yale's investment in James Boswell.

Special collections, circulating and non-circulating, continue to grow and expand into new fields. In every generation, scholars and librarians realize anew that one decade's ephemera constitute the next decade's archive: witness the splendid collection of science fiction at Syracuse University and the extensive archives of zines at Barnard and Buffalo, each of them flanked by more traditional precious materials. Meanwhile the history of books and readers, an interdisciplinary field that came into being in the 1970s and 1980s,

has exploded. Scholars and advanced students in many fields – classics, comparative literature, English, German, history, Romance languages – have realized that they can learn an enormous amount from studying “material texts,” the actual manuscripts and editions in which classic and non-classic texts circulated. Practitioners of this new form of scholarship have taught us how books took shape in scriptoria and printing houses, traced the networks of agents and booksellers who brought them to the public, and recreated, from marginal annotations and other traces of many kinds, the ways in which readers responded to the books before them. Electronic media play a role in the history of books, but the original manuscripts and early printed books play a bigger one. Every one of them, it turns out, is distinctive, thanks to the clues it offers about early owners and readers. And they can't all be digitized.

University administrators praise interdisciplinary scholarship. But they show less support for the centers where this new kind of interdisciplinary humanistic research takes place than did their predecessors, who saw them simply as deposits of human culture at its best, a generation or two ago. Support for special collections rarely seems generous. Recently the Stanford administration, pressed to provide new space on campus and severely constrained by local zoning, decided to demolish the library that had housed the university's superb East Asian collections and store the vast majority of the books and periodicals off-site. Faculty who protested were assured that the half-million books in many languages would all be available in digital form – a Micawberish promise at best, given that some of the alphabets in question cannot as yet be reliably digitized, and that copyright protection ex-

tends to Asia. It is hardly in the national interest – or Stanford’s – to make it harder to study Asia, at the outset of the Chinese century. Yet the decision made sense to administrators, who had to be reminded by scholars and librarians that, as an eloquent blog post put it,

[I]mmersion in a specialized library with a cohort of friends, colleagues, intellectual critics and others around you is an exceptionally good way to learn and to do research. When shared “public space,” with the resources at hand that enrich, identify and contribute to the definition of that space, is lost, the public, and private, discourse that that space engenders is diminished.

Libraries, then, face enormous technical and economic pressures, which are changing them in important and apparently irresistible ways: any plan to reconfigure or rebuild great libraries must take the full range of factors into account. Yet the transformation over the last three or four decades in the public that uses libraries has been even more dramatic – or so, at least, much commentary suggests. One shift seems particularly radical: the move away from library research by natural scientists and most social scientists. Forty years ago, scientists, natural and social alike, still depended on libraries for journals, which published up-to-date data and novel arguments. In some fields, such as mathematics, monographs continued to be published, even as they disappeared from others. In most, the article was the coin of the realm. Whatever the preferred form of publication, though, library work remained a familiar daily routine for thousands of university professors, research associates, and graduate stu-

dents whose professional interests were not, in any central way, humanistic or historical.

Between the 1960s and the present, the system of scientific publication in quantitative fields has undergone a series of revolutions. Circulated pre-prints, made possible by the Xerox machine, turned journals in many disciplines into archives rather than sources of fresh data. And if the Xerox machine slew its thousands, the computer slew its ten thousands. In 1991, Paul Ginsparg created the arXiv preprint server for high-energy physics. Within a year, arXiv became the standard mode for information diffusion in physics, and it has since grown to include astronomy, computer science, mathematics, nonlinear science, quantitative biology, and statistics, doing to the photocopied preprint – to say nothing of the formal journal – what the power loom did to the previously dominant handloom.

The transformation is real. In one natural science department at Princeton, a colleague tells me, all members, as soon as they rise in the morning, make a point of reading articles newly posted on the Web. Later in the morning, information about these, and evaluations of their results, circulate over coffee. Data and theses move almost instantly from university to university and continent to continent. From physicists to computer scientists, those who work in quantitative fields have developed new routines of daily work. They are utterly dependent on computer access to their virtual work space, and many – though not all – declare themselves independent of material collections of books or journals. In this new system, so it seems, libraries have lost their claim to be a universal good, either in academic or in social communities. Instead, they serve,

for the most part, a limited public, and one with limited influence within the university: practitioners of the humanities and the softer social sciences. More than one great university has recognized this fact by renaming its main collection a humanities library.

Journal subscriptions that library budgets pay for remain vital for some sectors of the science community, even if actual reading usually takes place on screen. Some social scientists continue to be dedicated consumers and producers of books: the best empirical work on the current condition of the academic research library has been done by the Chicago sociologist Andrew Abbott. On the whole, though, humanists form the majority of those who still see the library as vital in their day-to-day working lives, especially the smaller group of humanists that librarians label, a little worryingly, “heavy users,” most of whom are either faculty members or students completing dissertations.

Even committed humanists, however, often use the library in very different ways than their predecessors did – and these changes, too, have had a powerful effect on the institution. Forty years ago, a scholar who wanted to do intensive research almost always spent part of his or her day physically in the library. Copying machines were few and expensive, and the glossy pages they produced were ugly and fragile. More important, the library held all the keys to the kingdom of information, as well as the empire of texts in its stacks. Bibliographies, reference books, critical editions, journal articles: the library housed all of them. One had to go there not only to carry out a research project, but even in order to plan it. Most graduate students regarded the library as their central workplace and spent long days in its stacks and reading rooms. But professors still

active in research also spent hours in the library, reading and taking notes on new periodicals and other essential materials that they could not borrow. When opportunity allowed, senior and junior scholars also spent real time working in non-circulating collections like the New York Public Library, the Newberry in Chicago, and the Huntington in California – libraries whose policies made contact among readers at different stages in their careers unavoidable. In those days, the library was something like a craft workshop for humanists. Apprentices and masters carried out some of the same tasks, side by side, and learning to do research and write it up had a personal element.

In the 1980s and after, the personal computer gave its owners a newly powerful tool, one that could be used, for the first time, to compile materials, store them, and work them up into finished articles and books. But the personal computer was an unwieldy beast, and usually lived in an office or home study. Over time, more and more scholars made the room in which their PC glowed a permanent base camp for relatively quick incursions into the library. As the computer developed more and more capabilities – as it became the central device of scholarly communication and a node in worldwide information networks – scholars became less and less likely to spend long periods in the library. Why take notes by hand, only to have to transcribe them on the keyboard? Books could be taken out; journal articles, more and more, could be downloaded. Rare and unpublished texts could be scanned. Professors – even those who do the most intensive humanistic research – became an unusual sight in library stacks.

Many other factors pushed or pulled the professoriate, and almost all of them



involved moving away from the library. The floods of money for conferences and workshops, humanities centers, and visiting professorships that irrigated the humanities academy in the late 1980s and after cut into scholars' time for home library visits. The coffee shop – usually, in the last few years, equipped with WiFi – offered an alluring alternate workplace for those who accepted the laptop's promise of liberation from the messy desk and ringing phone. And the rise of electronic resources completed the job. Nowadays, humanists in many fields can do rigorous, well-documented work without needing to consult a single physical journal – or, indeed, a book. Even those humanists who continue to use books and print periodicals intensively – and many do – generally carry them to their workplace. Graduate students are more likely than professors to camp in libraries, each of them making his or her laptop the center of a mobile study. But they, too, now have previously inconceivable resources at their disposal on their own computers.

The results of all these developments are paradoxical. Scholars and students demand, and consume, books and other print materials in great quantities – greater than ever at my university, and, I am sure, at many others. The collective interest in scholarship and its results is more intense than ever, and the big non-circulating collections continue to attract plenty of readers, especially, though not only, those to whom they provide fellowship support. But the act of scholarship, which used to be, to some considerable extent, public and collective, has been privatized. Libraries cost more, their future provokes more discussion, and their collections receive more use than in the past. Physical libraries, though, seem, especially

at universities, to be turning from honeycombs of cells, a busy reader working away in each one, into magnificent Flying Dutchmen of the mind, which sail along, brightly lit and empty – or, in other cases, into enormous Internet cafés, which purchase users by offering them fast connections, coffee, and heating or air conditioning as the season demands.

The larger culture from which students now come to college in the first place, and by which graduate students are also formed, has also dramatically reshaped readers' habits. Few come as dedicated readers. For example, a graduate student at Princeton, where I teach, asked the students in the discussion sections he ran last spring how many of them had read four books for pleasure in the last month:

Bewildered eyes stared at me, but nobody raised a hand. “OK, so how about three books?” I persisted, but silence prevailed. When I got down to one, a student hesitantly admitted to have read something. That was one student in a class of 13 bright and promising undergraduates. The other classes I taught responded to this question similarly.

A number of other colleges and universities probably attract larger numbers of bookish students than Princeton does, and a number of Princeton students I know could have answered immediately with a list of titles. But the change in the general climate is clear to most humanities professors.

The nature of official reading – reading done for academic purposes – has also changed. In the 1960s, many students came to college already trained in the ways of library research. A well-educated freshman would already have written term papers and learned how

to find his or her way from bibliography to sources, sources to interpretative studies, and interpretative studies to reviews. In the course of doing further research at the university level, moreover, the student automatically became acquainted with the editions, journals, and other technical literature standard in his or her field. Writing itself depended on note-taking, and note-taking on the close reading of whole texts. It was a short step from looking up an article in a new journal to browsing in adjacent volumes, and another, equally short step to browsing in related journals; a short step from finding the critical edition of a source and citing it to finding commentaries and other directly relevant publications.

All this was made easier, though no less time-consuming, by the fact that the stacks could still accommodate the bulk of library collections: browsing in any good library amounted to a pretty good literature search. Research, in this old-fashioned, material form, acquainted the student with multiple styles of scholarly work and publication, automatically and without extra effort. Most MAs and PhDs ended up in possession not only of stacks of neatly written file cards, but also of a solid, if tacit, command of one or more disciplines.

Nowadays, as a recent study cosponsored by the British Library and a research center at University College London has shown, students arrive at universities with a very different set of skills and a very different orientation. Their primary source of information on life, the universe, and everything is the Web, and they normally seek information not by making a research plan but by entering words in a search engine – usually a non-specialist one like Google or Yahoo, rather

than the more focused engines and databases available on their university library web pages. Once these students arrive at the website they seek, moreover, they do not linger for intensive study. The average amount of time spent with an e-journal is four minutes; with an e-book, eight minutes. This is reading, but reading of a particular kind: goal-oriented, focused with laser-like intensity on particular bits of information, rather than on the larger nature of the text or problem under consideration. One of the euphemistic terms for this sort of reading, “power skimming,” reveals the nature of the enterprise.

At one extreme, this way of doing academic research leads to simple plagiarism, to the composition and submission of papers that are nothing more than mosaics of downloaded snippets. More serious is the larger vision of humanistic work embodied in this regime of study: texts of any kind, primary or secondary, are treated as agglomerations of information rather than as coherent wholes. Students using contemporary tools can, and do, compile stunning bibliographies of scholarly articles without having any idea of what methods or principles prevail in the journals in which they first appeared. They can deploy impressive statistical and textual information, obtained by search, without ever reading the texts analyzed. The power of search, which increases practically by the day, exempts them from learning how to pick a way through the reefs and shoals of the library and enables them to think they are making effective, critical use of materials of every kind, which are in fact torn from the context that is vital to critical judgment. This is the regime from which our future graduate students will emerge – from which they are emerging – a re-

gime in which the stacks will genuinely resemble a labyrinth, at least in the eyes of new users: an overwhelming maze of materials for which they have no Ariadne string.

Libraries apparently face at least four crises at once: a financial crisis caused by the proliferation of resources of all kinds; a spatial crisis caused by the continuing, massive production of print (only one major research library system, that of the University of Chicago, is currently trying to house all of its holdings, with a few exceptions, under one roof on its main campus); a use crisis caused by the transformation in scholars' working habits; and an accessibility crisis caused by the same changes in the larger ecology of texts and reading from which we began. It's not quite apocalypse in the stacks, but it's certainly a time of shaking, if not of breaking, what had seemed permanent institutions of unquestioned value.

No royal road leads to a solution for any of them, much less a solution for all four. But one simple recommendation may help a variety of institutions find working solutions to at least some of these problems. It's time, as many libraries on campuses and in cities have realized, for planning to become a collective activity, one in which all stakeholders play a role, rather than a top-down process. The fragmentation of knowledge is already far advanced and will become more acute with time. The difficulty of predicting the future – of knowing, for example, what working conditions might actually suit readers and fit their equipment ten years on – grows greater by the day, and even the hippest architect has no idea how research or study conditions will change over time. The only solution – a partial

one – is to bring the collective intelligence of the swarm to bear on the hive it used to inhabit, and still needs.

In doing so, we would be going – as scholars and readers sometimes should – back to the future. The great research libraries that took shape in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the result of active discussion and collaboration among administrators, scholars, and librarians. Presidents tempted brilliant professors to leave one university for another by the promise of excellent collections and large budgets with which to make them even better. Often no threats were necessary since all parties agreed on the vital importance of the enterprise. Widener, the greatest of academic libraries, was planned and shaped by a historian, Archibald Cary Coolidge, who collected materials not only for scholars in existing fields, but also for new areas where he hoped that Americans would develop interest and competence.

Similar stories can be told about the smaller, but still extraordinary, collections that dot the American landscape. If we hope to reconfigure the ways we do research and the resources we use, we need to convince university administrators that this enterprise still matters, and we need to recreate the kinds of discussion and decision-making that went on a century or half a century ago.

Whether your library is marble or glass, overweeningly classical or preeningly contemporary, it's time to bring librarians and scholars, planners and users together; to provide data so that all parties understand what resources exist and what problems threaten them, as they try to strike the elusive balance between needs and possibilities. Only by doing this can we hope to fashion what we now need: libraries that can manage the tsunamis of new books and data-

bases in ways that serve their readers; libraries that can continue to lead the world in range and depth; libraries that can regain their place as craft ateliers of scholarship and that can allure a larger number of students into discovering the seedy glamour of the printed book. Stanford faced up to the dissent provoked by the decision to demolish the East Asian library in the classic way, by impaneling a task force. Its report, now circulating on the Web, contains some surprises. Professors in many fields, it turns out – including the natural sciences – believe that browsing remains a vital, irreplaceable form of research.

A research library, the Stanford report suggests, should provide not only physical space where scholars can pursue research in books, but also virtual space where they can collect, store, and exploit electronic resources – an ingenious way to pull humanists, teachers, and students alike back into public workspace, in an environment that has the open, collective quality of a laboratory, but meets the needs of researchers who work with texts, images, and sounds. Over time, finally, scholars and scientists should collaborate to devise a form of virtual browsing that combines the qualities of the traditional experience with access to the full range of electronic sources.

These suggestions may or may not all find confirmation elsewhere, and even if they all do, they will not solve all the technical problems – much less restore the shaky foundations of a culture of books and reading. But all of them represent welcome additions to what has become a shadow duel between stereotypes. More collective efforts of this kind, efforts that draw on the experience and intelligence of library professionals, and that spring from the actual experience of scholars and students, might enable America to remain the

land of the great democratic library for generations to come. Fail to make them and we really may find ourselves confronted by what are now only spectral possibilities: Scylla and Charybdis, Starbucks and Gormenghast.

James J. O'Donnell

*Engaging the humanities:  
the digital humanities*

We seldom speak of the electrical, the automotive, or the aeronautical humanities, for all that those technologies have done to revolutionize the social order of scholarship and transform the practices of scholars. Someday we will no longer speak, I am sure, of the “digital humanities”; but for now the phrase is needed to distinguish the new objects, techniques, and contexts of study from those today’s senior scholars inherited from their forebears. A full professor today certainly sat at the feet of scholars who never thought of using a computer for any scholarly purpose whatsoever and just as certainly teaches students for whom the computer (perhaps even the net-enabled cell phone) is the first essential tool of every piece of academic work.

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Twenty-one years ago, Willard McCarty, currently professor of humanities computing at King’s College London, formed an email discussion group called “Humanist,” open to all those curious about what computing could do for the humanities, or humanities for computing. The list still flourishes, but veterans of the first few years speak of the conversations from around 1990 as if they had known one of the great salons of Paris in the eighteenth century or one of the coffee houses of Vienna in the nineteenth. Before we scattered to evangelize and work in our own disciplines and subdisciplines, institutions and departments, we, a modest group of true believers, met at “Humanist” to share a future none had yet seen. It was beyond obvious to all of us taking part in those early conversations that the content, methods, and modes of organization of humanistic scholarship were about to be changed, and utterly so.

Were we right? No one reflecting on the changes in habits of consuming and producing information that have developed in the last two decades can fail to be astonished by what is possible. Oceans of text, libraries of journal contents, and tens of millions of words of email group, chat room, and blogosphere opining now surround us. A col-

lection of what I recalled as infrequent, brief, and desultory email messages over the last decade about a piece of personal business turned out, on downloading, to comprise 150,000 words – a book-length manuscript with no real physical dimensions at all, just miraculously present wherever on the planet my three-pound laptop should travel. JSTOR, Muse, Google Books, Early English Books Online, the Brown Women Writers Project, the Patrologia Latina Database, the Open Content Alliance, to name a few: considering the riches available at just the click of a mouse from these resources, I recall spending childhood years at an army post in the desert, where the homes and libraries probably contained less of the heritage of civilized culture and scholarship than what now travels on the hard disk of my laptop, certainly far less than what I can access from a hotel room in Beijing or Doha on that laptop. If I am now surrounded by more books, more physical paper than ever, it is in large measure because Amazon makes overnight delivery all too easy.

But is this a revolution or only automation? The solitary labor of scholars, the objects of their study (for the most part), and the vehicles of publication and communication remain surprisingly stable, close to what scholars have known for generations. We have nearly mastered the production of “electronic journals,” whereby intellectual form and content duplicate the expectations of quarterly print journal publication of a generation ago, though the distribution now may be via PDF or other electronic medium as well as on paper. (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review* has just been told that a major indexing service cannot handle our digital output because we do *not* provide PDF files imitating print.) We speak glibly of “electronic books,” by which we mean collections of photographs or

PDF images of words arranged in a way that makes sense only if we continue to assume the physical form and limitations of the codex. When I read my colleague’s offprint from a printout of a PDF that she has emailed to me, nothing essential has changed, except that I now bear the cost and effort of the printing myself. Pioneer of media theory Marshall McLuhan, who argued that the content of a new medium is, at its outset, an old medium, has, it seems, been proven right once again.

More surprising than the progress we have made are the promises yet unfulfilled. We live in an age in which communication media are in a near-constant state of upheaval, with consequent dramatic relocation of authority and influence in cultural relations. But our classrooms today still look and feel like our old classrooms, with technology often present only in the form of high-end presentation facilities for instructors or as the topic of a guerrilla war to determine whether students shall be allowed to use their wireless laptops in class, whether those laptops might be used in the real service of their learning – or might be used just to surf, chat, and gamble, the better to fill the distraction and boredom that were probably there all along.

This peculiar position of humanistic learning, betwixt and between pasts and futures, has occasioned reasonable and thoughtful comment for some years now. The 2006 report, *Our Cultural Commonwealth*, published by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and arising from the discussions of a blue-ribbon commission organized by the ACLS, introduced humanists to the word *cyberinfrastructure* as a way of provoking reflection on the proximate and future needs of scholars for hardware, software, services, and leadership de-

signed to allow us to make best use of information technology in our work. But we remain stuck.

When humanists gather to discuss these subjects, three themes emerge from their conversations. First, they remain preoccupied with issues of traditional publication. Harvard University, long a hotbed of innovation and iconoclasm, has contributed its mite to the debate by this year requiring its scholars to distribute their work freely to the world on an open-access model, assuming as it made that requirement the obligation of creating, hosting, and preserving an “institutional repository” to manage the distribution. While it is a relief to think that Harvard’s fine scholars will finally begin to see their works have the influence they deserve, it is fair to wonder whether this action solves a real problem or only strikes a pose. After at least fifteen years of evangelism for Open Access, there exists no proven business model for sustaining that practice as a general means of publication, and traditional (often commercial) journal publication remains robustly healthy, having demonstrated for fifty years that commercial publishers can distribute more scholarly and scientific information more widely than ever before in history. It is a real and important question whether the subscriber-pays journal can or should be replaced by the author-pays (or author’s-institution-pays) journal that is free to all readers; but what remains without question is the fact that, even in cyberspace, there are no free lunches.

Preoccupation, meanwhile, with the best technique for distributing traditional materials to audiences that do not yet know they want them distracts from other concerns. Scholars who discuss these issues know well that a fundamental social transition has not yet

taken place. What does it take to become a scholar and acquire the standing and resources to pursue a life of learning? The road to tenure for humanists still runs through the editorial offices of university presses. Learned societies and even provosts have declared firmly that full faith and credit should be given to innovative forms of publication and scholarship, but printed monographs reign. Nowhere has it been established that you *cannot* get tenure for digital work; but in the absence of proof that you *can*, prudence decrees that the book is the thing. Given the rising age of assistant professors (as more time is spent pre-tenure on post-doctoral work, short-term jobs, and the like), we see more and more scholars spending more and more of their earthly lives waiting for the liberation that tenure begins. It is not proven that waiting for one’s forties is the best way to ensure a career of innovation and experimentation.

Preoccupation with existing forms of publication and concern for career-making prudence dominate conversations that sidestep a deeper anxiety. In principle, we know that there are tools and techniques at hand that could radically alter existing paradigms of work and open new doors of inquiry and understanding; but who will show us how to use them? For a historian to learn database design, GIS, or techniques of multimedia presentation is no easy thing – and the senior historian is not the first person to look to for instruction. A monograph based on the paper archives of nuns in Montana seems a whole lot easier to imagine and execute than an investigation of the economic geography of ecclesiastical institutions that integrates census and real estate transaction databases, mapping tools, visual archives, and oral history from all fifty states (much less one that crosses na-

tional borders), and prudence once again prevails. It is as though we have moved into a space far larger – vertiginously, acrophobically larger – than the one we have traditionally occupied, and we respond by keeping to our habitual scope and sphere of activity. While there are leaders in imagining new kinds of work with new kinds of results, the ordinary business of departments of humanistic learning goes on in 2008 much as it did in 1988 and even 1968, for all that the personnel may be refreshingly more diverse than before.<sup>1</sup>

We as humanists must challenge ourselves to ask whether and how we will imagine that new space within which we can work now, and how we can begin to occupy it well. Everyone recognizes that waiting for technologists to provide tools and, worse, tell us what to do with them is no solution, for the questions of scholarship must come from scholars. But the power of imagination does require concrete supplementation from those who know what the tools can do. So far, only locally and episodically have we found settings within which innovative scholars and sympathetic technologists can enter into a dialogue of experimentation and interrogation, the better to find good and important questions that can *now* yield answers hitherto thought impossible. Institutions build-

ing repositories to hold the inert content of the work now published in multiple forms at least should be constructing laboratories for real innovation and experimentation and making it possible to populate them with the senior and junior scholars and resourceful technical interlocutors who can collaborate in inventing a future we have not yet entered.

Such institutional ventures face obstacles not insurmountable, but daunting nonetheless. The resources that would be devoted to creating such research and development opportunities to support our own professional future are seen inevitably as taking away from the resources needed to deliver instruction and scholarship in the present. Ask any department chair how many faculty lines she will give up in order to get such a laboratory and the answer is likely to be a firm “zero” – and not only or necessarily because departments look first to the upholstery of their own nests, but more likely because the economics and governance of higher education make it most probable that every academic unit is too thinly staffed to deliver the highest quality education at its current level of ambition to the crowded classrooms that we face. When there are too few professors, diverting resources to invest in the future is superficially unattractive. Can we successfully make the case that it is, at any rate, necessary?

And what if we succeed? Let me caution first that we should make sure we know what we will do if our dreams come true. Long inured to an economics of scarcity, in which every fragment of information from our cultural past is lovingly cherished and studied in detail, we have yet to think seriously and remake our cultural practices to cope with the inevitability that information supporting virtually every kind of scholarship will, in time, be available in an

1 From 2002 – 2006, the National Humanities Center presented an annual Richard W. Lyman Award (with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation) for achievement in humanistic scholarship making resourceful use of information technology. The recipients, Jerry McGann of Virginia, the late Roy Rosenzweig of George Mason, Robert Englund of UCLA, John Unsworth of Illinois, and Willard McCarty of London, are exemplars of far-seeing work.



abundance that will demolish any attempt to do justice to each piece of evidence in traditional ways. The nineteenth-century novel is an object of loving study for all of those who do not have to read every single novel published in that hundred years; but Google will soon make something approaching that totality ubiquitously available and in principle unavoidable. What makes sense as a proposition about that subject when no living individual or even no conceivable team of scholars can master the material? That question has an answer or answers, and the exhilaration of the next generation of study can and should come from innovative, iconoclastic scholars beginning to ask it.<sup>2</sup>

Second, we should remember that Euro-American humanists have not made the world their oyster in the last generation. The work of serious scholars in the humanities is a tiny fraction of the totality of global investment in higher education or in cultural production. In the world of commercial cultural products, such relative rarity is a sign of a niche market, a luxury product.<sup>3</sup> For us, however, the risk is rather that of becoming an orphan brand, scarce enough to be neglected and not valuable enough to be cherished. It is not neces-

sary to take sides in any of the “culture wars” of the last century to observe that the nature and form of the work of humanistic scholars since the 1960s has produced self-marginalization more than envy or admiration. Even within the academy, small, tense conversations occur when it is observed that humanities-wide peer review bodies (reading applications for distinguished fellowships, say) show a strong predilection for work in history and historicizing cultural study over critical work in literature or theory. Even academic publishers express concern at the relative sag in sales for literary scholarship.

No amount of digital tintinnabulation or expulsive labial frication can in themselves find an audience. Some work naturally expects and is satisfied with an esoteric readership. But historically the best work for the few has existed on a continuum with work that makes itself, at least, understood to the many and succeeds, at best, in making clear that what goes on in the quiet of a seminar room is important in itself, even for those who do not understand it. We have undeniably lost ground in the contest for respect.

Can a more resourceful kind of scholarly performance in new spaces help us in winning back respect and resources? Packaging is unlikely to be enough. A combination of original work and imaginative presentation is what is needed. We are unlikely to come to such a combination without fresh thinking about what we do, but we are equally unlikely to come to it without fresh thinking about how we do it and how we present it to an audience.

The community of scholars is alive and lively. None of the fears I express here represent inevitable loss, nor is innovation unimaginably far away. The

2 Jonathan Gottschall of Washington and Jefferson College offered a first-pass answer at just such a question in a May 11, 2008, article in *The Boston Globe*. The article anticipated his book *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

3 In a lecture at Georgetown in 2006, the eponym of a famous global luxury brand said that he judged the maximum size of a luxury product's market was \$3 billion; sell more than that and you lose your cachet. Yves Saint-Laurent was sniffingly dismissed as a luxury goods maker who had become vulgar in that way.

concrete steps we need are undoubtedly few in number, but must be marked by imagination, reach, and courage. We should fight our battles to preserve and ensure the right to quote, study, and make reasonable scholarly use of the cultural record without undue limitation by unenlightened application of the copyright statutes. We must work with publishers, librarians, and public agencies to make sure that the cultural record (including, increasingly, the digital record) is preserved for the future. Thinking through what it is to “edit” that record – that is, to make it intellectually accessible for serious users – will require innovation and deserves the respect of promotion and tenure committees. Access to resources, technical and human, that support scholarly ambition is a battle to be fought at the local level, but one to be supported by wise public funding and philanthropy nationally and internationally.

In the end, the work is ours. Do we have the right questions to ask? Do we have the right disciplinary alignments? Are we making the new (including the very products of cyberspace) a part of our own sphere of study and interpretation as responsibly and carefully as we maintain the old (and link the study of old and new)? Will we be ambitious enough in our questions to find answers large enough and worthy of our culture and our contemporaries? We are the heirs of a long tradition of civilization and its cultures, but that means that in our space and time we *are* that civilization, which can only be what we in the academy together with the many beyond the academy's walls, living in a common space of imagination, analysis, and truth, make of it. There is every reason for optimism about our chances as scholars to maintain and expand a place in the culture's discourse; but there is

very nearly every reason for pessimism as well. Which will prevail? The jury is out.<sup>4</sup>

4 I am happy to express my thanks to Pauline Yu and Steve Wheatley of the ACLS for asking me to organize and chair a panel at the May 2008 annual meeting of the ACLS in Pittsburgh on issues related to the theme of this essay, and to Peter Bol (Harvard), Tara McPherson (USC), Don Brenneis (UCSC), Jim Chandler (Chicago), and Mike Keller (Stanford) for their lively, provocative, and imaginative participation in that forum. This essay would not have taken the form it does without the benefit of that conversation.

Kay Kaufman Shelemay

*Performing the humanities at  
the Ethiopian Millennium*

The performing arts, sometimes regarded as separate from the humanities, in fact bring the humanities to life.<sup>1</sup> Through performance, the written word travels from the mind's eye to the lips and to the ear; painting and sculpture suddenly spring into motion; and music takes wing from the imagination or from a score to fill all available sonic space. A moment of performance, at its best, gathers together various domains of human expression, a sensory experience able at once to narrate history, enact social relationships, symbolize systems of belief, and generate feelings of fear, comfort, or joy. While the humanities are generally conceived as the disciplines spanning fields of knowledge such as literature or philosophy, they si-

multaneously provide the basis for much of human behavior and patterns of interaction expressed through the arts. Music and its performance, in particular, convey these multiple domains of knowledge as well as provide "audible entanglements," shaping both individual imaginations and broader communities.<sup>2</sup>

Performance tells us less about procedures than it does about processes. Ideally, performance incorporates spectators

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1 The American Academy of Arts and Sciences's Humanities Indicators Prototype expressly excludes the arts from the scope of the humanities. See Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanities-indicators.org/statement.aspx>: "Scope of the 'Humanities' for Purposes of the Humanities Indicators" (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008). My essay engages and takes occasional issue with that exclusion. I acknowledge the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for fellowships that supported a leave year during which this essay was written. I thank Ellen T. Harris, Steven Kaplan, and Daniel Mekonnen for helpful comments.

2 Jocelyne Guilbault, "Audible Entanglements: Nation and Diasporas in Trinidad's Calypso Music Scene," *Small Axe* (17) (2005): 40.

and performers alike, reaching out from the present to extend both into the past and the future, reaffirming existing collectivities and creating new ones. Take, for instance, the September 8, 2007, performance in Washington, D.C., to mark the advent of the Ethiopian Millennium.<sup>3</sup> More than five thousand D.C.-area Ethiopian immigrants<sup>4</sup> turned out for the concert, which provided a bracketed moment for members of the Ethiopian diaspora community in D.C. to reaffirm their identities as Ethiopians, in solidarity with (but also in opposition to) others dispersed around the world. That Ethiopians in the homeland marked the passage of the millennium with a celebratory concert, too, provides fascinating data for comparative studies, discussed briefly in my conclusion.

The D.C. concert was divided into three parts: sacred music (*zema*) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; cultural music (*bahḍlawi*), a category subsuming traditional secular instrumental, vocal, and dance styles; and modern or popular

3 The Ethiopian calendar, based on a Roman Julian model, runs approximately seven-and-a-half years behind the Gregorian calendar adopted in the West. Thus the Ethiopian millennial year began in early September 2007, both in Ethiopia and in its diaspora.

4 Members of the second largest community of late-twentieth-century African arrivals to the United States, Ethiopian refugees and emigrants began to leave their homeland in large numbers in 1974, following the overthrow of the Ethiopian monarchy and subsequent revolution. Nearly a million Ethiopians are estimated today to live in diaspora, with the majority settled in the United States. The Washington, D.C., metropolitan area is the unofficial center of Ethiopian life in North America. See Solomon Addis Getahun, *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants and Refugees in America, 1900 – 2000: Patterns of Migration, Survival, and Adjustment* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2007).

music (*zämänawi*), incorporating aspects of international musical genres and instrumental resources that have entered into Ethiopian musical experience as part of twentieth-century transnational discourse and cultural circulation. Each section reinforced the significance of musical styles named and conceived as separate musical categories derived from the Ethiopian homeland. But the concert didn't simply map an idealized landscape of musical styles from the past or evoke nostalgia for the Ethiopian homeland. Through performance it brought to life the humanistic domains of religion, ethnicity, and nationalism, which continue to engage diaspora Ethiopians. The concert allowed the Ethiopian American community to acknowledge the complexities of its diaspora identity through performances by some of its most talented musicians, more than 150 of whom are permanent residents of Washington, D.C.<sup>5</sup>

To start the event, a group of ten D.C. church musicians led a forty-minute performance of a section of the Ethiopian Orthodox holiday ritual music. In traditional white turbans and flowing vestments, they sang their chants in the ancient Ethiopian liturgical language, Ge'ez, accompanied by tinkling of small, metal sistra, the swaying of prayer staffs, the beating of two large kettledrums, and graceful dancing. At times, the high, piercing ululation by hundreds of women seemed to weld

5 I am currently building a collection of oral histories recorded with Washington, D.C., musicians of Ethiopian descent to be deposited, along with recordings and video footage of their performances, in the Archive of Folk Culture at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. I am grateful to the John W. Kluge Center of the Library of Congress for their generous support of this project.

this concert audience into a congregation. The majority of Ethiopians living in diaspora are Orthodox Christians, propelled into exile when their historic church lost its preeminent position, as the emperor at its head was deposed and Orthodox Christianity forfeited its status as the official religion of the state. The reestablishment of their churches in the United States and the continued performance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian liturgy at once lend life and renewed vigor to a venerable belief system and the institutions that sustain it.

An ensemble of four traditional Ethiopian minstrels, two playing six-stringed lyres (*krar*) and two playing one-stringed bowed lutes (*masḗnqo*), began the second section of the concert with two hours of cultural music. The lyres and lutes sounded traditional, pentatonic Ethiopian melodies in unison, with individual instruments ornamenting the tunes in slightly different ways, giving rise at moments to an intense heterophony. A fifth musician tapped traditional rhythmic patterns on an electronic drum machine. This mainly traditional instrumental ensemble accompanied several well-known Ethiopian cultural singers, who sang in Ethiopian vernacular languages, in alternation with lively performances of Ethiopian dances by a troupe of three men and three women who changed costumes after each number to represent various important Ethiopian ethnic communities.

Competing ethnic identities, which always simmered beneath the surface of pre-revolutionary Ethiopian national life, have become a looming political issue in Ethiopia since the 1974 revolution and an even more sensitive subject under the post-1991 federalist policies. The Ethiopian diaspora, which incorporates Ethiopian immigrants from a range of ethnic backgrounds, continues to en-

gage with its various ethnic and regional heritages on multiple levels: ethnicity is at once a marker of identity as well as a source of dissent within intense diasporic political processes. The concert announcer in D.C. underscored the strong political valence of cultural musics performed on the millennial occasion by remarking at one point during the show, somewhat ironically, "This will go on until we get through all the ethnic groups."

After a long intermission, during which a large, raised bandstand was erected center stage for the third part of the show, a brass-dominated jazz band of the sort that has accompanied popular music in Ethiopia since the late 1960s took its place.<sup>6</sup> As the band sounded the well-known instrumental introduction to "Tizita," the most popular Ethiopian musical symbol of nostalgia and longing for the homeland, the beloved Ethiopian singer Mahmoud Ahmed suddenly appeared and began singing. Mahmoud,<sup>7</sup> one of the only Ethiopian musicians not resident in the D.C. area to perform at the concert, sang several sets of popular music. He bounded around the bandstand, dressed in Ethiopian traditional white jodhpurs and tunic, topped by a Western-style vest prominently bordered in the colors of the Ethiopian flag. If Mahmoud's dress signaled a strong connection with the Ethiopian nation, his songs about the homeland, as well as rousing dance pieces accompanied by syncopated, Ethiopian rhythms,

6 For an overview of the impact of modernization and international musical trends in twentieth-century Ethiopia, see Francis Falceto, *A Pictorial History of Modern Ethiopian Music* (Addis Ababa: Shama Books, 2001).

7 Ethiopians are traditionally known and referred to by their first names.

completed his transformation into a national symbol. While the cultural musicians in the second section of the concert had performed Ethiopian ethnic identities, it was made clear that Mahmoud Ahmed was performing the Ethiopian nation in this third and final section.<sup>8</sup>

Each of the three sections of the millennial concert was carefully delineated from the others across all expressive domains; each incorporated different performers, distinctive musical repertoires, contrasting costumes, and distinctive styles of staging and choreography. Yet taken together, the overall progression from sacred Christian music to the panoply of secular ethnic styles to music and dance from the popular domain brought to life the Ethiopian humanities. In the course of the evening, the performance highlighted realms of distinctive Ethiopian religious practice; the music, poetics, folklore, and art that have arisen over the course of Ethiopian history; and the acknowledgment of present realities in exile, of life today lived a great distance from the historical motherland.

This millennial concert, of course, spoke loudest to an immigrant generation, which, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, remains closely wedded to the musical and cultural past, drawing their shared, formative musical experiences from Ethiopia. But make no mistake: this concert was engaged equally with the present.

8 Among the recent ethnomusicological studies that have explored music's deep engagement with political life, see Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Jocelyne Guilbault, *Governing Sound: The Cultural Politics of Trinidad's Carnival Musics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Many diaspora Ethiopian Orthodox Christians continue to pray in churches that sustain their traditional liturgy. Those who can afford to do so hire minstrels to sing, play, and accompany dancing at family weddings and celebrations, giving rise to an active circuit of musicians who travel to perform for members of Ethiopian communities from Atlanta to Los Angeles to Seattle. Even the diaspora's younger generation, many American born, attends public concerts mounted to showcase Ethiopian popular singers in the larger Ethiopian diaspora urban centers. These events, like Mahmoud Ahmed's section of the Millennium concert, feature a large dance floor, insuring that the concert turns into a dance party.

Performance helps bridge challenging transitions at times of dispersal, conveying memories of the past while also providing a communication medium to enact and celebrate multiple aspects of everyday life. In such moments, performance has the capability to embody ideas and sentiments of importance to individual and collective well-being. The Washington, D.C., Ethiopian Millennium concert just described could *only* have taken place in the Ethiopian diaspora in America; its size, scope, and range of contents emerged from distinctively Ethiopian American sensibilities at the 2007 millennial moment. Indeed the major Millennium concert held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was a very different affair, featuring the Black Eyed Peas, a multiethnic group from Los Angeles with musical roots in hip-hop.<sup>9</sup> A second Addis Ababa mil-

9 See "Peas at Ethiopia's 3rd Millennium Bash," AP Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 7, 2007; available at <http://cbs5.com/entertainment/Ethiopia.s.Coptic.2.459395.html>.

lennial concert a few weeks later presented Beyoncé Knowles, the American pop star of Louisiana Creole and African American descent.

At the dawn of their new millennium, Ethiopian Americans sustain dual identities and sensibilities. The Millennium concert provided a moment in which they could come together and perform their heterogeneous musical world, defining their diaspora experience through Ethiopian modes of performance at the same time. That the millennial moment literally performed the struggle to be Ethiopian in America, in domains ranging from religion to ethnicity to politics, sheds light on the power of performance and its role in bringing the humanities to life.

*Performing  
the  
humanities  
at the  
Ethiopian  
Millennium*

# Kathleen Woodward

## *The future of the humanities – in the present & in public*

Since the mid-twentieth century, the professionalization of our disciplines has been a hallmark of higher education in general and the research university in particular. Despite the repeated calls over the past twenty-five years for a renewal of the civic mission of higher education,<sup>1</sup> professionalization continues to hold tenacious sway and is largely understood to contradict the purposes and practices of public scholarship, which, in turn, is dismissed under the demoralizing rubric of service or the paternalistic rubric of outreach. It is only too clear that “there has been a weakening of the informal compact between the universi-

ty and society,” as the historian Thomas Bender points out in his invaluable essay on the American university from 1945 to 1995.<sup>2</sup> If some twenty years ago it could be asserted in the *Report from the National Task Force on Scholarship and the Public Humanities* that the humanities “are valuable for their own sake and the nation must support and sustain scholarship because that enriches the common fund of knowledge,”<sup>3</sup> today the notion of the

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1 See, for example, the important work of Campus Compact, founded in 1985 to press for the intertwined values of service learning and the responsibilities of citizenship; Ernest Boyer’s influential writing from the 1990s on the scholarship of engagement; and LEAP (Liberal Education and America’s Promise), the decade-long initiative, begun in 2005, of the American Association of Colleges and Universities to underscore the importance of a liberal education, a primary value of which is civic knowledge and engagement. In 2006 the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching announced a new classification that institutions of higher education could elect to adopt: community engagement.

2 Thomas Bender, “Politics, Intellect, and the American University, 1945–1995,” *Dædalus* 126 (1) (Winter 1997): 3.

3 James Quay and James Veninga, “Making Connections: The Humanities, Culture and the Community,” *National Task Force on Scholarship*



intrinsic good of the humanities is definitely not a part of what is generally referred to as “making the case” for the humanities.

What is public scholarship? In suggesting an answer to this question, I turn to the influential work of *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, a national consortium established at the University of Michigan in 2001 that numbers over eighty institutions across the United States representing the full spectrum of higher education, from community colleges and colleges of arts and design to research universities and liberal arts colleges.<sup>4</sup> Now based at Syracuse University, *Imagining America* is devoted to expanding the place of public scholarship in the humanities, arts, and design in higher education in the conviction that it serves a democratic purpose. *Scholarship in Public*, its groundbreaking report on the importance of including public scholarship in considerations of promotion and tenure, was released in May 2008. Authored by Julie Ellison and Timothy K. Eatman, the report offers a definition – necessarily abstract and general – of what is referred to as publicly engaged academic work. Public scholarship, the report argues, is integral to the academic area of a faculty member’s research or creative activity. It includes “different forms of making knowledge ‘about, for, and with’ diverse publics and communities,” and “it contributes to the public good and

yields artifacts of public and intellectual value.”<sup>5</sup> As the report notes, public scholarship exists on a continuum with traditional scholarship and often takes the form of projects that combine research, teaching, and creative activity as well as publication. Recommended is the use of a portfolio in the tenure dossier that might include writing for a non-academic audience, policy reports, and oral histories. Not all work in the public humanities would be considered public humanities scholarship.

At a meeting held in June 2008 at Syracuse University’s Lubin House in New York City to consider the report, discussion swirled around this definition of public scholarship, with a focus on what was understood by “scholarship” itself and with special pressure placed on the keywords *community* and *public* (about which more later). Discussion also centered on the questions that might guide the evaluation of public scholarship, with suggestions including: What constituencies are served? What new interdisciplinary connections have been formed? Is the “translation” of scholarship to larger audiences effective? Is the project innovative? Significantly, however, the report begins not with a definition of public scholarship in the humanities, arts, and design or with prescriptions for evaluation, but rather with a multitude of compelling examples from across the United States, most of which take the form of collaborative projects between faculty in higher education and community groups and institutions

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*and the Public Humanities* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1990), 2.

4 *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, <http://www.imaginingamerica.org/>. Julie Ellison was the founding director of *Imagining America*; Jan Cohen-Cruz is currently the director.

5 Julie Ellison and Timothy K. Eatman, *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University, A Resource on Promotion and Tenure in the Arts, Humanities, and Design* (Syracuse, N.Y.: *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, 2008), 1.

(among them, K – 12 teachers, ethnic and race-based local groups, and museums). Among the examples are historian and architect Dolores Hayden’s *Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* and the “Great Wall of Los Angeles” mural in the Tujunga Wash Flood Control Channel, a project of the Social and Public Art Resource Center founded by artist Judy Baca.<sup>6</sup>

*Scholarship in Public* is animated by a sense of vibrancy and possibility. “The report was inspired,” we read, “by faculty members who want to do publicly engaged academic work and live to tell the tale.” Few of our graduate students, however – the very people who will become our future faculty – arrive at graduate school with a sense that public scholarship in the humanities is a possible path for them. It is in research universities in particular where requirements for the publication of research in order to gain tenure have increased, and where “the words ‘public’ and ‘scholarship’ continue to live on different planets.”<sup>7</sup>

This is one of the reasons why, in 2003, in tandem with the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation’s Responsive Ph.D. initiative, the Simpson

Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington launched a weeklong Institute on the Public Humanities for Doctoral Students. To my knowledge the first of its kind in the country, the Institute included twenty-five doctoral students and featured presentations by national leaders who have done remarkable work in the public humanities, readings and discussion, project-based work, and site visits. That inaugural year speakers from across the country included Robert Weisbuch, then president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation; Julia Reinhard Lupton, founding director of Humanities Out There at the University of California, Irvine, a program that links university students with students in the largely Latino school district in nearby Santa Ana; and David Scobey, then director of the Arts of Citizenship program at the University of Michigan. We read and discussed work by Dolores Hayden, Edward Said, Robin Kelley, Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari, Michael Bérubé, Gail Dubrow, and Tony Bennett, among others. We also read and discussed reports (yes, reports; I have grown fond of reports over the past few years and think they should be read *and* discussed) from the American Council of Learned Societies and the American Association of Higher Education. We visited Bellevue Community College, the Seattle Art Museum, and downtown Seattle’s historic Panama Hotel, built in 1910 in the International District to house Japanese laborers, which today is a tea house and modest hotel. (It possesses the only remaining Japanese bathhouse in the United States.) Leaders of community organizations participated as panelists, as did faculty members at the University of Washington whose projects included a collaboration between university faculty members and high school teachers called Texts and

6 See Dolores Hayden, *Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

7 Ellison and Eatman, *Scholarship in Public*, vii, xii. In “The Associate Professor Project Survey,” a presentation on a project of the Modern Language Association, David Laurence reports that the stress on publication as a criterion for tenure in the fields of modern literature and language has basically doubled over the past forty years across the spectrum of Carnegie doctoral universities, master’s universities, and baccalaureate colleges, with master’s universities and baccalaureate colleges following the lead of Carnegie doctoral universities; Modern Language Association Convention, December 28, 2007.

Teachers; an exhibit of drawings by children of war under the poignant title *They Still Draw Pictures*; and a worldwide network of public forums on matters of urgent public concern held annually in libraries in September, aptly called The September Project.<sup>8</sup> Tellingly, most of the faculty members were at the rank of professor. (The one who was an assistant professor left the university in the conviction that his work in the public humanities would not be honored here as scholarship and research.) I remember that Institute as a heady experience that opened many doors.

We have continued to hold the Institute every fall. Readings, site visits, and speakers have changed, of course.<sup>9</sup> But one of the initial guiding purposes remains: to put public scholarship in the portfolios carried by our doctoral students into their future and thus to help bring about structural change in higher

education.<sup>10</sup> We want these future faculty members to arrive at their colleges and universities ready to take up scholarship in the public humanities and live to tell the tale, and *not* to wait until they have been promoted to the rank of professor. Since 2003 one hundred and fifty graduate students have participated in the Institute. Many have fanned out across the country as they take up positions in higher education, and many have gone on to positions with non-profit organizations.

One of my hopes has been that the Institute on the Public Humanities will inspire other centers to create similar programs for their graduate students as well as other programs in the public humanities. For the past thirty-five years, centers and institutes for the humanities on university and college campuses in the United States have served as sites for innovation, as laboratories for incubating emerging modes of knowledge and investigating new objects of study in cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts. Continental theory, British cultural studies, feminist studies, mass cultural studies, television studies, performance studies, animal studies, theories of evidence, critical race studies, theories and

8 For information on Texts and Teachers, directed by Gary Handwerk, see [http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/programs\\_texts\\_teachers\\_0809.htm](http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/programs_texts_teachers_0809.htm). See Anthony Geist and Peter N. Carroll, *They Still Draw Pictures: Children's Art in Wartime from the Spanish Civil War to Kosovo* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), a catalog of the exhibition. For information on The September Project, directed by David Silver and Sarah Washburn, see <http://theseptemberproject.wordpress.com/connecting-the-world-one-library-at-a-time/>.

9 Readings added to the Simpson Center for the Humanities Institute on the Public Humanities for Doctoral Students over the past few years include work by Ien Ang, Lance Bennett, George Sanchez, Debra DeRuyver, and Jennifer Evans, among many others. Regarding the 2008 Institute, see [http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/Institute\\_on\\_the\\_Public\\_Humanities\\_for\\_Doctoral\\_Students.htm](http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/Institute_on_the_Public_Humanities_for_Doctoral_Students.htm). For more information, contact Miriam Bartha, codirector (with Bruce Burgett) of the Institute.

10 For a discussion of the Institute within the local context of other institutional programs and projects at the University of Washington, Bothell, and issues of community-based participatory research, transdisciplinary research, American studies, and cultural studies, see Bruce Burgett, "Mixed Genealogies: Between Cultural Studies and American Studies," in *Reconfigurations of American Studies*, ed. Donald Pease and Elizabeth Dillon (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming). See also Miriam Bartha and Bruce Burgett, "Specifying the Scholarship of Engagement: Using the IA Document to Teach Collaboration Practice and Institutional Development," *Imagining America Newsletter*, May 2007, 10 – 11.

discourses of the emotions, biotechnology and culture: these are just a few of the broad areas and subjects taken up by humanities centers and institutes around the country.

We speak of technology transfer. Similarly, we can speak of project and program, model and mission transfer in the humanities. Humanities centers are highly adept at circulating new ways of undertaking research and of learning. And indeed in recent years what has been on the radar screen of centers is precisely the public humanities; in fact the public humanities has been a key ingredient in the creation of many new centers. In 2007 the University of Iowa's Obermann Center for Advanced Studies launched a weeklong annual Graduate Institute on Engagement and the Academy; it is also planning a conference on models of public humanities for fall 2009. The center at Ohio State University was established in 1997 under the explicit rubric of the public humanities; it is called the Institute for Collaborative Research and Public Humanities, and one of its key missions is to enable the humanities to act as a bridge between the university, the city of Columbus, and the broader public culture. The University of Wisconsin at Madison has long had a humanities center devoted to research. Founded in 1959 as the Institute for Research in the Humanities, it was the first in the country (and in North America) to be dedicated to the support of research in the humanities with resident and visiting fellows, with the originating model being that of individual academic research. Forty years later, in 1999, a new Center for the Humanities was created alongside the Institute for Research as the pivot point of contact between the humanities on the Madison campus and the public. It sponsors a special program, begun as a

pilot project in 2004–2005, called Humanities Exposed, which fosters collaborative projects between University of Wisconsin graduate students and area schools, museums, and neighborhood centers. In 2000 the University of Florida established the Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere, with one of its primary missions being cultural work in the public interest. The tagline for the Humanities Institute at the University of Texas at Austin, which was founded in 2001, is “thinking in community,” and programs include sabbaticals for members of the community at the Humanities Institute, thus supporting scholars *from* the community *in* the academy. In spring 2007 Michigan State University established a Public Humanities Collaboratory. I could cite many more examples from around the country.<sup>11</sup>

In announcing a virtual forum on “Democracy and Higher Education: The Future of Engagement” in early 2008, the New England Resource Center for Higher Education and the Ket-

11 In “Toward the Practice of the Humanities,” Sylvia Gale, founder of Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) for Imagining America, and Evan Carton, director of the Humanities Institute at the University of Texas at Austin, offer an impassioned account of how their work in the public humanities evolved; they estimate that of the some thirty-five humanities centers at research universities that belong to the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), two-thirds of them identify the public humanities as part of their mission. See *The Good Society* 14 (3) (2005): 38–44. For information on humanities centers both in the United States and around the world, see the website of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, <http://www.chcnetwork.org/>. The Consortium was established in 1986 and is now based at Duke University under the leadership of Srinivas Aravamudan, director of the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute.

tering Foundation noted “a sense of drift and fragmentation in the movement to promote community engagement and the formation of democratic citizenship as key institutional priorities for American colleges and universities.” On the contrary, and by all indications, I see the humanities flourishing in public across the United States.<sup>12</sup>

How do people who practice public scholarship describe their role and refer to themselves? In 2004 the Simpson Center received a welcome gift to establish the Simpson Professorship in the Public Humanities. It was awarded to geographer Katharyne Mitchell, whose research up until that point had been located firmly in the academic world. Two of the primary goals of this three-year professorship (it carried significant resources as well as a 50 percent release from teaching) were to model public scholarship to the academic community at the University of Washington (and beyond) and to establish meaningful connections with communities in the greater Seattle area involved in Mitchell’s multiyear project, which dealt with childhood, education, and schooling. (Another goal of the professorship was to underscore the necessity of providing time for a research project over an ex-

tended but concentrated period in contrast to the habitual practice of the sabbatical, which is no sooner begun than is over.) Many public goods emerged over the course of this three-year project under the rubric of “Reclaiming Childhood,” among them editorials by Mitchell in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, a town hall meeting with kids from Seattle schools speaking on how they use digital technologies, an ongoing research cluster composed of University of Washington faculty and Seattle-area writers and educators, and an inventive and exuberant multimedia installation in our University Libraries exhibiting work by young people reflecting on their experience of childhood. And there will be more, including a trade book on how childhood is being stolen from children in America, coauthored by Mitchell, the poet Frances McCue, and Laura Kastner, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Washington.

But I want to single out the book Mitchell edited under the title *Practising Public Scholarship: Experiences and Possibilities beyond the Academy*. She asked academics – among them, literary and cultural studies scholar Terry Eagleton (University of Manchester), historian Patricia Limerick (University of Colorado), sociologist Katherine Beckett (University of Washington), public policy biologist Paul Ehrlich (Stanford University), geographer Doreen Massey (Open University), and historian Howard Zinn (Boston University) – to reflect on their experiences of becoming public scholars while remaining within a university system. What different terms do they deploy to describe themselves? Public scholar. Activist scholar. Scholar-activist. Scholarly producer. Scholar-citizen. Scholar-advocate. Academic-activist. Public activist-scholar. Public intellectual. The term “applied humanities”

*The future  
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12 “Democracy and Higher Education: The Future of Engagement,” sponsored by the New England Resource Center and the Kettering Foundation, 2008; [http://nerche.org/kettering\\_colloquium/vforum.html](http://nerche.org/kettering_colloquium/vforum.html). To this we must add the rich variety of programs sponsored by the fifty-six humanities councils that are located in every state and U.S. territory and are funded, in part, by the National Endowment for the Humanities. See [www.neh.gov/whoweare/statecouncils.html](http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/statecouncils.html). See also the State Federation of Humanities Councils, whose president is Esther Mackintosh, at [www.statehumanities.org/](http://www.statehumanities.org/).

also appears. It is clear that many of the contributors to the volume are searching for a vocabulary (tellingly, it is often hybrid) to capture the range of their commitments and the work they have done that was virtually unprecedented in the postwar U.S. research university.<sup>13</sup>

The essays in *Practising Public Scholarship* have many things to recommend them, not least of which is the forthrightness of their voices, grounded in experience and offering advice. Some, like scientist Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb* (so titled by the publisher; Ehrlich preferred the more academic *Population, Resources, and the Environment*), have had long careers as public scholars. Ehrlich underscores the importance of making it clear when one is speaking as a scientist and when as a scholar. Ignore interdisciplinary boundaries, he counsels. Others, like Julia Lupton, have only relatively recently adopted the role of public scholar (“scholar-citizen” is her preferred term). She writes about how her experience with UC Irvine’s Humanities Out There changed her professional life in literally every aspect – “from my writing and teaching styles (clearer, more direct, more grounded), to my vision of the university’s relationship to the community (it should be reciprocal, serious, and sustained).”<sup>14</sup> All of the contributors give life to the distressingly bland genre of the university mission state-

ment with its contemporary – and, in my view, flat – rhetoric of “civic engagement.”<sup>15</sup> (Is not a “vision statement” from a university a contradiction in terms?) The volume communicates a sense of openness and possibility, curiosity and drive. It champions experimentation and innovation, commitment and passion, and it speaks to the important relationship between scholarship and advocacy for social justice – of *movement* in higher education. Indeed Julie Ellison has often called the public humanities just that: a movement.

At the same time, I cannot help but remark that some of the conversations about civic engagement, public scholarship, and the public humanities in the United States betray a distinctly anti-intellectual strain. In the two recent reports under the title of *New Times Demand New Scholarship*, from conferences about civic engagement in research universities, the focus is on collaborative partnerships between the university and the private and public sectors, and the word *intellectual* is strikingly absent. We find references to the importance of social development, community development, and economic development, but not intellectual development.<sup>16</sup> The

13 Katharyne Mitchell, ed., *Practising Public Scholarship: Experiences and Possibilities Beyond the Academy* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

14 Julia Reinhard Lupton, “Philadelphia Dreaming: Discovering Citizenship Between the University and the Schools,” in *Practising Public Scholarship*, ed. Mitchell, 49–50.

15 It is notable that a participant at the February 2007 conference held at the University of California, Los Angeles, on the engaged research university remarked that in over twenty years of university work he had never heard a student ask about or use the term “civic engagement.” See Tim K. Stanton, ed., *New Times Demand New Scholarship II: Research Universities and Civic Engagement: Opportunities and Challenges* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, and Campus Compact, 2007), 17.

16 See Cynthia M. Gibson, *New Times Demand New Scholarship: Research Universities and Civic*

stress is on the solving of social problems and responding to community needs; the language is, well, lifeless report-language, dull and listless for the most part. (I am intimately familiar with this genre, having written my share of reports.)<sup>17</sup> But in the humanities, communities of inquiry often come into being through the articulating of questions, which are often inchoate in the beginning and can never be definitively answered. Communities are formed around questions; they are communities of the question. In the humanities, inquiry adds context that ever widens and deepens; this is what has been famously called thick description, and to this I would add thick theory. In short, I believe that the work be-

ing done in the public humanities can give life to the uninspiring generalities in *New Times Demand New Scholarship*. In fact, I wonder to what extent the very phrase “civic engagement” is a stumbling block for the idea – and ideal – of the commitment of scholars to larger social purposes and intellectual goods.

The report from *Imagining America* on public scholarship, tenure, and promotion identifies two basic models of public scholarship: community-based projects and the public presentation of knowledge in books, magazines, and forums for non-academic projects. The former are privileged as collaborative and engaged (some identified as community-based participatory research), as eschewing a hierarchy of knowledge and exemplifying the co-creation of knowledge. Unless I have misread the report, the term “public intellectual” never appears in it, and *intellectual* as an adjective is seldom used. Granted, in the United States the term “public intellectual” is often identified with the specific historical cohort of the New York intellectuals – Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, Mary McCarthy, Clement Greenberg, and Susan Sontag, among them.<sup>18</sup> But I suspect that to some degree this lack mirrors the age-old American tradition of antiintellectualism. (The omission may also be traced to decades of identity politics, with the cautionary lesson of not speaking on behalf of others.) To find such an attitude lodged in the academy itself, particularly within the humanities, is an index, I think, of the institutional intellectual insecurity of

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*Engagement: A Leadership Agenda* (Medford, Mass.: Tufts University and Campus Compact, 2006) and Stanton, ed., *New Times Demand New Scholarship II*; available at <http://www.compact.org>. At a third conference, held in 2008 at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, it was decided to establish a network of research universities under the rubric of The Research University Civic Engagement Network (TRUCEN). In *New Times Demand New Scholarship II*, *intellectual* appears only twice as an adjective, one of which is in a quote from Richard Brodhead, president of Duke University and a scholar of nineteenth-century American literature.

17 I am struck by the world of difference in tone and texture between the genre of the university report from the first decade of the twenty-first century and the contributions that appear in an issue of *Dædalus* from forty years ago devoted to “The Future of the Humanities.” If today we write about participatory action-based research, in 1969 Herbert Blau, in an essay that bursts with blooded thought, wrote about participatory democracy in the wake of the student revolution. We need to reclaim that sense of intellectual urgency. See “Relevance: The Shadow of a Magnitude,” *Dædalus* 98 (3) (Summer 1969): 654 – 676.

18 The late Edward Said, in his essay “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals,” in *The Public Intellectual*, ed. Helen Small (London: Blackwell, 2002), observes that the United States is less hospitable to the use of the word *intellectual* than are France, Britain, and the Islamic world.

people in the humanities in the United States today even as many of us are trying, with confidence, to reinvent the humanities within the university.

In addition, the very term *public* has been put under decades of pressure, interrogated for its ideological biases (and there are many) by intellectuals (the word is apt) ranging from Nancy Fraser to Michael Warner.<sup>19</sup> (The term *community* has also been subject to critique, but that is another story.<sup>20</sup>) One of the very virtues of the idea of the public – as opposed to a community which is usually understood as local – is that it is unbounded and general. Michael Warner has called it a “practical fiction.”<sup>21</sup> I consider it an ideal. But in certain contexts the word *public* has been stigmatized. Consider public housing, for example. More to the point, consider higher ed-

19 See Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992) and Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002). Warner’s reflections in *Publics and Counterpublics* are brilliant and polemical. I take particular issue with his jeremiad against what he caricatures as journalistic simplemindedness. He opposes the functions of intellectuals and journalists, indicting intellectuals who embrace clarity of expression with a desire for fame and unfairly ridiculing the discipline of history in particular for “the fascination with journalistic authority,” 139 – 140.

20 Miranda Joseph, for example, in *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), trenchantly shows how the romance of community – the celebratory discourse about community – appears virtually everywhere. See also Miranda Joseph, “Community,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glen Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

21 Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 8.

ucation itself: a counterintuitive and disabling shift in our rhetoric about the public and the private has taken place over the last twenty years. Institutions of higher education have conceptualized the “public” as being outside of the institution, as the very rhetoric of civic engagement and the engaged university reveals. At the same time, members of the public, as historian of education William Zumeta has pointed out, have come to understand public universities (or what we now call state-assisted institutions) as providing private rather than public goods – that is, offering individuals degrees for success.<sup>22</sup> Concomitantly, as James Duderstadt and Farris Wommack observe in *The Future of the Public University in America*, “Federal policy has shifted away from the view that higher education is a public good and toward the view that education benefits primarily the individual.”<sup>23</sup> Thus adding the word *public* to *intellectual* might be considered too hot to handle.

Indeed the figure of an *intellectual*, calling up an individual, can seem to resist an association with *public*. In the academy today the work of the individual, cast as solitary, has become somewhat suspect as the model of cross-disciplinarity and collaboration, bequeathed by the sciences and adopted by administrative leaders, has assumed rhetorical ascendancy.<sup>24</sup> In embracing the public

22 William Zumeta, “The New Finance of Public Higher Education,” *The NEA 2006 Almanac of Higher Education*, ed. Harold Wechsler (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 2006).

23 James J. Duderstadt and Farris W. Wommack, *The Future of the Public University in America: Beyond the Crossroads* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 40.

24 The humanities and arts have their own traditions of collective and collaborative work,



humanities we must take care not to inadvertently set to the side the tradition of reflective and interpretive inquiry on the part of individuals as a practice that is seen by some as suddenly out-of-date.

But others use the terms *intellectual* and *public intellectual* without difficulty. A few years ago literary and cultural studies scholar Michael Bérubé, one of our most animated public intellectuals, pointed to the emergence in the United States of an African American intelligentsia whose prominent intellectuals – among them, Gerald Early, Cornel West, Michael Denning, Lani Guinier, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and bell hooks – write and speak for large audiences.<sup>25</sup> The title of Howard Zinn’s contribution to *Practising Public Scholarship* is “The Making of a Public Intellectual.” The late Edward Said, in my view one of our great public intellectuals, embraced the idea of the intellectual with impunity and the life of the intellectual with vitality, writing in *Representations of the Intellectual* that the intellectual must be pre-

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ranging from theater productions and conferences to the creation of dictionaries, but these traditions are rarely invoked. I should also note that, in contradistinction to “professional science” or “conventional science,” there is an emerging tradition of “civic science” in community-based participatory research. Tenets include a commitment to respect the knowledge-making practices of community groups and to consider knowledge-making practices that are intended to produce better accounts of the world, may be experiential, may (only *may*) be generalized, and may not translate into solutions to problems. Louise Fortmann, an environmental scientist at the University of California, Berkeley, explored this at the Conference on Expanding Interdisciplinarity from Campus to Community, held on June 5, 2008, at the University of Washington.

25 Michael Bérubé, “Public Academy,” *The New Yorker*, June 30, 2003.

pared for “the risks and uncertain results of the public sphere – a lecture or a book or article in wide and unrestricted circulation – over the insider space controlled by experts and professionals.”<sup>26</sup> Patricia Limerick insists that the receptivity of the public “to scholars who speak clearly, pragmatically, and originally is demonstrably unbounded.”<sup>27</sup> Terry Eagleton, referring to himself as a public intellectual, tells a small story that illustrates this wonderfully:

Some years ago, I was associated with a worker writers’ movement in Britain, and went down to Bristol to speak at a workshop of working-class men and women who were trying to write their life histories. I was speaking to them about the idea of autobiography, trying to keep my remarks as lucid as possible, when an almost-blind woman in her eighties interrupted me in her rich West Country burr to ask rather brusquely: “What kind of language is that you’re talking?” I was just on the point of apologizing for any unintentional obscurantism, and for being so remote from my audience, when she added: “Because I’d like to learn it.” She went on to publish a magnificent history of her life, to which I added a brief introduction.<sup>28</sup>

26 Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 87.

27 Patricia Limerick, “Tales of Western Adventure,” in *Practising Public Scholarship*, ed. Mitchell, 15.

28 Terry Eagleton, “Comrades and Colons,” in *Practising Public Scholarship*, ed. Mitchell, 10. In that same essay (at 7), Eagleton draws a distinction between an intellectual and a public intellectual; he makes a further distinction between speaking as a citizen and as an academic:

Intellectuals need to be fluent in more than one academic discourse if they are to be *public* intellectuals – which is to say, if they want to bring ideas to bear on the political culture as a whole. The in-

I read this small story as a cautionary parable. As intellectuals we must embrace our knowledge and not dilute it; translate it, yes, but not water it down completely. I would like to see more emphasis in the conversations about the public humanities on the importance of intellectuals writing for publics larger than our professional circles. Consider, for example, the influential and imaginative work of philosopher Judith Butler, historian Mike Davis, legal scholar Patricia Williams, and art historian T. J. Clark.

The growth and development of public scholarship in the humanities across disciplines and institutions of higher education (from research universities to community colleges) is exceedingly uneven. I would hazard that faculty members in doctoral institutions in literary studies and language training in particular are on the whole less familiar with the national conversation about public scholarship (ongoing now for some twenty years, with a long history of the reciprocal relationships between the academy and society before that) than are, say, historians, who can point to the field of public history, or sociologists to public sociology. How many literary studies and language faculty members could refer to the discussion about metropolitan universities?<sup>29</sup> Or to ask a dif-

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lectual range, in other words, is determined by the social function – for the word “intellectual” denotes a social function rather than a personal characteristic.

29 See Daniel M. Johnson and David A. Bell, eds., *Metropolitan Universities: An Emerging Model in Higher Education* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1995). The responsibility of metropolitan universities to their communities is a key theme in these essays. See especially R. Eugene Rice’s essay on “The

ferent kind of question: What would public literary scholarship mean?<sup>30</sup>

If there is a latent insecurity in this essay, it is my concern about the future of literary criticism. I am a reader both by profession and temperament, a professional and an amateur. I understand what Grace Paley means in her poem “Fidelity” when she says she can’t abandon a book she has begun because the characters have become her “troubled companions” and “life had pages or decades to go / so much was about to happen to people.”<sup>31</sup> Reading has not disappeared. Book clubs abound. But it is a fact that literary criticism is read virtually *only* by other literary critics (and perhaps not that many). That this is not the case with the practice of history prompts me to confess I may be guilty of discipline envy.<sup>32</sup> What would public literary criticism look like? Would a public broader than the readership of the *New*

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*New American Scholar: Scholarship and the Purposes of the University.*”

30 The Modern Language Association has taken important steps in the direction of public scholarship. Under the aegis of Michael Holquist, the Presidential Forum at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in 2007 was “The Humanities at Work in the World.” *Standing Still: The Associate Professor Survey*, a report forthcoming from the Modern Language Association, recommends a more expansive conception of scholarship, research, and publication, one that reconsiders the dominance of the monograph and includes work produced and disseminated in new media. It also recommends public scholarship as an important mode of research.

31 Grace Paley, *Fidelity: Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 41.

32 See Marjorie Garber, *Academic Instincts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) for characteristically witty observations on discipline envy.

*York Review of Books*, *American Book Review*, *Bookforum*, and the *American Poetry Review* care? In any case, the question may well be moot. It is indisputable that we are moving – have moved – from a print culture to a screen culture (indeed, now often a hand-held screen) and that this tectonic shift has been in the making for well over a century with the cascading accumulation of the inventions of photography, film, television, video, the computer, and the Internet. What does this mean for public scholarship in the humanities?

Over the past few years the exploration of the digital humanities at humanities centers has accelerated at an exponential pace.<sup>33</sup> It is abundantly clear that the advent of the new digital technologies is transforming how scholars in the humanities undertake their research in unprecedented ways. New methods – among them, text mining, visualization, virtual environments, and collaborative digital research spaces – are being invented and tested. New ways of representing our scholarship – integrating text, image, sound, and video – are emerging, as are new ways of disseminating it to ever broader publics. One of our main challenges today is to integrate new forms of digital publication with the wealth of traditional forms of printed knowledge, creating powerful hybrid forms, a synthesis of printed

33 This is not the place to detail the initiatives in the digital humanities that have converged in recent years to produce the quantum leap we are witnessing. But I do want to mention the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory (HASTAC), the national consortium cofounded by Cathy Davidson (Duke University) and David Theo Goldberg (University of California, Irvine) that, with the digital humanities as its focus, has inspired so much creativity in the humanities; <http://www.hastac.org>.

and digital media, knowledge that circulates widely. And here it is that the digital humanities and the public humanities forcefully intersect.

“Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History” provides an inspiring example. Directed by James Gregory (history) with the assistance of doctoral candidate Trevor Griffey (history), this project at the University of Washington began as an undergraduate teaching experiment, with Gregory hoping to motivate his senior history majors by promising to publish on the Web the best of their research on the intertwined histories of racial justice and labor justice in Seattle. The students did original research on racially restrictive real estate covenants. They collected rare photographs and videotaped oral history interviews with people who had been central to these movements for justice. And this is what happened: the course not only turned them into practicing historians, many of them became published historians on an innovative website now archived at the University of Washington Libraries. It provides abundant material about this forgotten chapter in Seattle’s history, including historical overviews and timelines, streaming video of the interviews, activist flyers from the period, and an interactive map of “Segregated Seattle.” Among its many distinctions is the collection of materials devoted to the Seattle Chapter of the Black Panther Party, the most comprehensive collection of interviews, publications, and other materials about any of the Black Panther Chapters. The website thus attests to the project’s success in building trust among the many people involved from the university and Seattle’s communities. Indeed the creation of strong bonds of trust – all-important and intangible – is one of the precious precipitants of the project.

*The future of the humanities – in the present & in public*

Another of the gratifying results of this project is its very reach. The research has a large virtual audience, both in the Puget Sound region and across the country. The website has an average of ten thousand visits a month, and the project is frequently cited as a source and hyperlinked to other websites. Many area middle schools and high schools use the site as a teaching tool, and the project has been included in instruction modules for police officers and other city employees. It has also brought people together in dialogue in public forums at city schools. “Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History” thus demonstrates the important point that online scholarly publication can generate face-to-face communication. Another measure of the project’s success is that it is generating sister projects. Other universities – San Francisco State University, to name one – are contemplating undertaking such research in their communities.<sup>34</sup> And similar projects – digital public humanities projects – are in the making. One of them is the ambitious “Redlining California,” a collaboration between the San Diego Supercomputing Center’s Sustainable Archives and Library Technologies Lab and the University of California Humanities Research Institute at the University of California, Irvine.<sup>35</sup>

34 “Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History”; <http://www.civilrights.washington.edu>. For more information about the project, see James N. Gregory and Trevor Griffey, “Teaching a City about Its Civil Rights History: A Public History Success Story,” *Perspectives on History*, April 2007; available at <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2007/0704/0704tea1.cfm>.

35 See Paul Tooby, “Preserving History on a Humanities Grid for the University of California,” *Envisioning the Future: Research Advances 2007* (San Diego: San Diego Supercomputing

In June 2005 *The Seattle Times* featured on its front page the students’ research on segregated housing, confirming the fluid circulation of information between media (in this case, the web and print) and thrilling the students in the process. Three years later Jim Gregory, speaking at a meeting of leaders involved in the Carnegie Foundation’s Teachers for a New Era at the University of Washington, declared that *he* had been transformed by the project into a teacher for our new era. More than that, his very idea of what it can mean to be a scholar and an intellectual today has changed dramatically.

It is doubtful that in the past the transformative project that is “Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History” would have figured prominently in a file for promotion at a research university. Today, with *Imagining America’s Scholarship in Public* in our hands, it is my hope that will no longer be the case. But of course promotion and tenure policies are not the real point. For many people in the humanities, the very idea of the possibility of public scholarship has created a larger sense of meaning where before there had been only a profession, not a calling. As the sociologist C. Wright Mills insisted, “Scholarship is a choice of how to live, as well as a choice of a career.”<sup>36</sup> Among other things, the public goods offered by many public humanities proj-

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Center, 2007); <http://www.sdsc.edu/news/researchadvances.html>. The project directors are Richard Marciano, director of the San Diego Supercomputing Center’s Sustainable Archives and Library Technologies Lab, and David Theo Goldberg, director of the University of California Humanities Research Institute.

36 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 196.

ects stretch our affective understanding of the experience of other people and draw us together in a common purpose. In “Seattle Civil Rights” there is outrage at social injustice and hope for a different future to be found. In the “Great Wall of Los Angeles” there is joy captured in collective artistic expression.

There is a long historical tradition of the democratic impulse in higher education in the United States, and we need to reinvigorate that founding vision – it is both noble and pragmatic – of service to the public and work with the public. What is ultimately at stake in the public humanities is a form of scholarship and research, of teaching and learning, that honors commitment and concrete purpose, has a clear and present substance, reduces the distance between the university and life, and offers civic education for all involved, revealing the expansive future of the humanities – in the present and in public.

*The future  
of the  
humanities  
– in the  
present &  
in public*

# Harriet Zuckerman & Ronald G. Ehrenberg

## *Recent trends in funding for the academic humanities & their implications*

Never abundant, financial support for the “academic humanities”<sup>1</sup> is now scarce. How scarce it is, both in absolute and relative terms, and whether the humanities now confront particularly hard times, are the pressing questions. To piece together an answer, we ask first how much the government, foundations, and private donors provide for the humanities now compared

to estimates John D’Arms made in 1995, when he completed his important review of “funding trends.”

Then we probe expenditures universities and colleges make on the humanities. Is there evidence, for example, in institutional budget allocations that the humanities are holding their own, or have rising costs of other academic activities, such as scientific research, been accompanied by reduced support for the humanities? And last, because public universities are so large and numerous, and because many operate on conspicuously tight budgets, we ask

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1 John D’Arms, “Funding Trends in the Academic Humanities, 1970 – 1995: Reflections on the Stability of the System,” in *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Alvin Kernan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 32. The “academic humanities” are “all fields of study normally grouped together . . . that are identified as departments and programs in humanities, and in which the Ph.D. is the highest earned degree.” They also include history (sometimes classified with the social sciences) and aspects of anthropology, ethnology, and archaeology. On the academic humanities more generally, see also Eric S. Rabkin, “Ways of Knowing in the Humanities,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 12 (1) (1978): 105, and Gerald Graff, “The Future of the Profession,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 27 (1) (Spring 1994): 65 – 69.

how well the humanities in this class of institutions have fared in comparison with their counterparts at private universities. The answers to such questions are not mere matters of financial accounting. Although much can be achieved in the humanities with quite small investments, the pursuit of excellence in scholarship and teaching in these fields is not cost-free. For relevant evidence, we draw on the American Academy of Arts and Sciences's useful Humanities Indicators Prototype, as well as a variety of other available (but often imperfect) data sources.<sup>2</sup>

The D'Arms report, covering the quarter century between 1970 and 1995, showed that financial support for the academic humanities fluctuated and was, to say the least, unevenly distributed. Some parts of the enterprise clearly did better than others. He observed that the federal government's contribution via the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) declined only slightly in real terms between 1982 and 1995. However, despite this small overall reduction, the share of NEH funding going to academic researchers and academic institutions decreased far more sharply than it did for other

activities, such as support of the "public humanities," while an "astonishing" (D'Arms's word) increase in NEH expenditures went to preserving library collections and increasing access to them.

At the same time, private funders also decreased their support for humanistic inquiry. The major private sources of fellowships in these years, such as the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), the National History Council, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, cut back their expenditures and in some instances reduced the number of awards they made. More generally, the share of all foundation funding that was directed to the humanities also declined.<sup>3</sup> These trends led D'Arms to conclude that "the costs of the [humanities] enterprise . . . [were] being transferred away from the foundations and from the federal sector and back to the colleges and universities themselves – the very institutions that, of course, are already providing the major funding for the scholarly activities of faculty."<sup>4</sup> In response, some academic institutions increased their investments in the humanities, for example by creating interdisciplinary centers and institutes on their campuses, and some added chairs and graduate student support in the humanities to their fund-raising campaigns. But university administra-

2 The data presented in this essay have necessarily been chosen opportunistically. It has not always been possible to locate "current" data; we therefore report the latest information available. No comprehensive dataset on the finances and institutional characteristics of the humanities in comparison with other fields in the arts and sciences is available. The views expressed here are solely our own. Much appreciation goes to Mirinda Martin, a PhD student in economics at Cornell, for her research assistance and to Sharon Brucker, the data manager for the Mellon Graduate Education Initiative. We also extend thanks to Carolyn (Biddy) Martin, Philip E. Lewis, and Joseph S. Meisel for careful readings and astute comments.

3 In the early 1980s, D'Arms notes, the NEH and a small number of private foundations played a disproportionately large role in supporting scholarly work. By the 1990s, however, only the NEH and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation "maintained [their] record of substantial grant making." D'Arms, "Funding Trends in the Academic Humanities," 38. At the 2008 meeting of the ACLS, the Mellon Foundation was dryly labeled "Glinda the good witch" of the humanities.

4 D'Arms, "Funding Trends in the Academic Humanities," 47.

tors report that these efforts have been neither easy nor uniformly successful.<sup>5</sup>

Two important developments of the last twenty years provide context for funding for the academic humanities. The first is the rapid rise in the cost of scientific research, and the second is the decline in the resource base on which public (as against private) institutions can draw.<sup>6</sup> The federal government's retreat from supporting a substantial share of academic science has had much the same effect as its retreat from supporting the academic humanities – although its scale is vastly larger. The costs of science have been shifted increasingly to universities and colleges despite the fact that academic research is responsible for a major share of the nation's scientific advances. Making these advances has been associated with escalating the costs of conducting scientific research and providing the infrastructure it requires. To take just one parochial example, a new life sciences technology research building at Cornell University is budgeted to cost over \$160 million,<sup>7</sup> and this is just

5 This continues to be the case. For one example, the University of California, Berkeley, was recently the beneficiary of a generous grant of \$150 million from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for professorships that included the requirement that the University also raise funds for the same purpose. Robert Birgeneau, chancellor at UC Berkeley, acknowledges that it has been far easier to raise such funds for the sciences than for the humanities; see "Frontiers of Knowledge, Frontiers of Education," April 15, 2005; available at <http://cio.chance.berkeley.edu/chancellor/birgeneau/remarks/4-15-2005-frontiers.htm>.

6 Paula E. Stephan and Ronald G. Ehrenberg, eds., *Science and the University* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).

7 By way of comparison, Cornell has budgeted \$17 million for an addition to its art muse-

um. Another somewhat ambiguous indicator of expenditures on the humanities is Cornell's spending \$42.2 million on its library in 2005 – 2006. Part of this total, of course, is for scientific serials and is not for the humanities alone. See *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 31, 2007.

the beginning: the building is part of a \$500 million "genomics initiative" that includes recruitment of new faculty. At the same time, an additional \$310 million are being spent on new buildings for the physical sciences and engineering, all financed by funds the university itself will have to provide – and provide all at once.<sup>8</sup>

Cornell is but one of many universities making such expenditures.<sup>9</sup> Academic research in the sciences has also become more expensive because the costs of research have risen, because federal policies relating to indirect cost recoveries and requirements for the provision of matching funds have imposed further expenses on universities, and because competition for new faculty members in the sciences and engineer-

8 As Philip E. Lewis, former dean of the arts and sciences at Cornell observed, the scale of institutional expenditures on the sciences cannot be understood without putting together the costs of the diverse projects under way at a given time, all of which must be paid for simultaneously.

9 The drive to invest in science research is conspicuously evident in decisions universities have made to build new campuses to accommodate growth in scientific activity. Consider Harvard's construction of a new campus across the Charles River in Allston (to be used for a variety of academic purposes, including the sciences) and Yale's recent purchase of the Bayer Healthcare complex nearby to enlarge its scientific facilities while providing space for other academic activities. See *The Boston Globe*, January 12, 2007, and Yale University News Release, "Yale University to Expand Medical and Scientific Programs with Acquisition of Bayer Complex," April 30, 2008.



ing has intensified, leading to dramatic increases in the size of start-up packages being offered in recruiting new faculty members.

Such increases in the costs of academic science inevitably lead, as we suggested, to questions about how they are being paid for and whether reductions in spending on the academic humanities have helped pay the bills. This leaves open of course the thorny question of how well current expenditures on academic science and the academic humanities permit research and scholarship to be pursued at a high level of distinction.<sup>10</sup>

Like the rising costs of science, the shrinking resource base of public col-

10 In recent years, federal support for academic science has increased in some areas but not in others. Although funding by the National Science Foundation (NSF) rose between 2000 and 2008 for mathematics and the physical sciences and to a lesser degree for the geosciences, expenditures on computer and information science, engineering, polar science, and those parts of the biological and social sciences that the NSF supports have been flat. *AAAS Funding Update on NSF R&D in FY2008*; available at <http://www.aaas.org/spp/rd/nsfo8s.htm>. Budgets for the biological sciences supported through the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have been larger in absolute size but have been essentially flat since 2005. They have lagged well behind inflation and even farther behind the price index the NIH has developed for biological research. From a high in 2001, when approximately one out of three applications was funded, the success rate dropped in 2008 to one in five. This has occurred because of an increase in applications and despite a larger number of grants being funded. See *National Institutes of Health in the FY2008 Budget. AAAS Report XXXII, Research and Development FY2008*; available at <http://www.aaas.org/spp/rd/o8pch7.htm>.

When adjusted for inflation, federal funds for academic science and engineering actually declined in the last two years, an “unprecedented” development in the thirty-six years such

leges and universities has potentially significant implications for the academic humanities.<sup>11</sup> Financial problems state governments have faced since the late 1980s have kept average appropriations per full-time student in public institutions in line with the rate of inflation but have not permitted them to grow. At the same time, new demographic and political pressures call for enlarging enrollments and building new campuses. The University of California system, for example, is in the midst of a major expansion in which new campuses, such as the one at Merced, are being built while the enrollments at a number of the older established ones are also rising: during the decade that ended in 2006 – 2007, full-time equivalent enrollment at the California system as a whole increased by about 40 percent.

The low rate of growth in appropriations per student combined with increasing enrollments has strained the budgets of public colleges and universities and has not been compensated for by increases in tuition income, which has grown at no more than 2 – 3 percent above inflation. As it happens, the same rate of increase has occurred in tuition at private institutions, but simple arithmetic shows the highly unequal absolute effects of equal rates of increase because tuition levels are much higher at private than at public institutions. Thus similar percentage increases in tuition generate many more dollars per student at the former institutions than at the latter.

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data have been collected by the National Science Foundation. Doug Lederman, “‘Unprecedented’ 2-Year Decline for U.S. Science Funds”; available at <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/08/25/r-d>.

11 Ronald G. Ehrenberg, ed., *What's Happening to Public Higher Education?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

Soaring endowments and high rates of return that a number of selective private colleges and universities have enjoyed in the last decade also contributed to differences in spending between public and private institutions – at least up to fall 2008.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, certain large public universities, such as the University of Michigan and the California and Texas systems, also benefited from endowment growth. However, taking into account the number of students these institutions enroll, the resources that are available per student are on average far smaller than those of private institutions.

Taken together, these trends have reduced the resources of public relative to private institutions and have led to significant disparities developing between them in spending on instruction, in average faculty salaries, and in student-faculty ratios. Recent data show that median spending on instruction per full-time enrolled student at private research universities was almost twice as high (\$14.1 thousand) than at public research universities (\$7.3 thousand).<sup>13</sup>

D'Arms, on completing his review of funding trends in 1995, described him-

12 See *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 1, 2008. The disastrous state of financial markets in 2008 has already brought endowment growth to a halt. See Geraldine Fabrikant, "Harvard's Endowment Falls \$8 Billion," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2008.

13 Scott Jaschik, "The Spending Side of the Equation," *Inside Higher Education*; available at [www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/05/01/spending](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/05/01/spending). While per student spending on instruction increased at about 2.2 percent in private universities between 1987 and 1996, it has increased only 1 percent between 1998 and 2005. Per student spending on instruction at public universities grew even more slowly in the same periods, at 0.5 and 0.4 percent, respectively. This has had the effect of maintain-

ing, and even slightly increasing, the gap between private and public institutions. self as "uneasy yet cautiously optimistic" about the future.<sup>14</sup> We know from events that have occurred since then even cautious optimism was not in order. The very next year (FY 1996), Congressional appropriations to the NEH were cut by 38 percent – a very significant reduction and surely not a cause for optimism. Owing to the way the NEH budget is structured (a legislatively mandated formula has driven allocations to State Humanities Councils since 1987 and has since kept them roughly constant), it was discretionary grant programs, which include funds for fellowships and research, that were hit hardest by the 1996 reduction in funding. That year, the funding of discretionary programs was cut by about 47 percent, and it has yet to recover. Congressional appropriations to the NEH since then (FY 1997 – FY 2007) have remained roughly constant in real terms,<sup>15</sup> as has the overall funding level of its discretionary grant program.<sup>16</sup> By 2006, changes in the distribution of expenditures within that program left only 18.4 percent of discretionary funds available

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ing, and even slightly increasing, the gap between private and public institutions.

14 D'Arms, "Funding Trends in the Academic Humanities," 55.

15 Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV1a.jpg&o=hrcoIVA.aspx\\_topIV1: Part IV. Figure IV-1a: NEH Budget Request versus Final Appropriation \(Adjusted for Inflation\), Fiscal Years 1966 – 2007](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV1a.jpg&o=hrcoIVA.aspx_topIV1:Part%20IV.Figure%20IV-1a:NEH%20Budget%20Request%20versus%20Final%20Appropriation%20(Adjusted%20for%20Inflation),Fiscal%20Years%201966-2007) (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008). Research universities also benefit from the National Defense Education Act/Title VI, which supports foreign language teaching and area-studies centers.

16 Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-1c.jpg&o=hrcoIVA>

for research by humanists and for scholarly projects. At the same time, funding for preservation and access activities in libraries, including digitization projects, took over a quarter of these funds (28.3 percent).<sup>17</sup>

The latest NEH budgets contain appropriations for FY 2008 and requests for FY 2009; these are much the same, totaling \$144,707 million and \$144,350 million, respectively. However, budgetary allocations have changed once again. A major increase was requested for the “We the People” program, which is largely focused on secondary schools, although it provides some help to historically black colleges and universities, and Hispanic-serving and tribal colleges.<sup>18</sup> Requests for preservation and access were reduced by 25 percent in the 2009 budget while those for challenge grants were reduced by 24 percent. Thus the share of support available for the academic humanities from the NEH shrank considerably while the overall NEH budget has remained more

or less constant since the large reduction in FY 1996. Based on requests for the coming year, support for the academic humanities is likely to be an even smaller fraction of the total.

The academic humanities did little better in securing support from private foundations. Although foundations substantially increased their expenditures on “the humanities,” between 1992 and 2002, and especially after 1995, the academic humanities received a very small share of the benefits. Instead, additional funds went to other grant recipients in the Foundation Center’s “humanities” category: museums, historical societies, and historical projects. Almost half of all private foundation spending in this period on the “humanities” went to museums and historical societies,<sup>19</sup> while the share of the “humanities and related social sciences” was 2.1 percent, down from the earlier figure of 2.5 percent.<sup>20</sup> Even so, in terms of absolute expenditures, private foundations have awarded far more support to “the humanities” than the NEH has. In 2002, foundations

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.aspx\_topIV1: Part IV. *Figure IV-1c: NEH Program Funding (Adjusted for Inflation), by Type, Fiscal Years 1987–2007.*

17 Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-2.jpg&o=hrcoIVA>  
.aspx\_topIV2: Part IV. *Figure IV-2: Distribution of NEH Program Funding among Activity Types, Fiscal Year 2006.*

18 *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 15, 2008. The We the People website reports, “[O]n Constitution Day 2002, President George W. Bush announced We the People, an NEH initiative to explore significant events and themes in our nation’s history, and to share these lessons with all Americans.” A large number of grants have been made to preserve historic sites and support an initiative that brings reproductions of important American paintings, sculptures, and photographs to all secondary schools.

19 See Loren Renz and Steven Lawrence, *Foundation Funding for the Humanities: An Overview of Current and Historical Trends* (New York: The Foundation Center, June 2004), 3; available at <http://www.fdncenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/human.pdf>. These increases on spending for the humanities were especially marked after 1995. Apart from the practice of aggregating a variety of arts and humanities-related institutions in one omnibus category, there is reason to think, based on spending on the academic humanities by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, that the Center’s database underestimates grant expenditures in this area.

20 Humanities Indicators Prototype, <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-8c.jpg&o=hrcoIVC>  
.aspx\_topIV8: Part IV. *Figure IV-8c: Share of All Foundation Giving Going to Humanities Activities, 2002.*

spent approximately \$335 million,<sup>21</sup> more than double the level of funding the NEH provided that same year. But foundation spending is now increasingly directed toward initiatives solving “real world problems” and on activities having measurable social and economic impact, with the result that the humanities are likely to receive less attention than they once did.

As D’Arms observed, the costs of humanistic inquiry and related activities, once borne by the federal government, are being shifted to colleges and universities. How well then have the humanities fared relative to other fields of inquiry in recent budget allocations by colleges and universities? Three classes of data shed some light on this question: how much humanists are paid compared to faculty members in other fields and the extent of relative growth or decline in their salaries; the number of jobs available in the humanities and changes therein; and expenditures on academic libraries and opportunities for publication provided by university presses. These are far from comprehensive gauges of institutional support for the humanities, but, limited as they are, they are instructive not because they reveal clear-cut answers about the well-being of the humanities, but because they show how complicated current circumstances are and how difficult it is to draw simple conclusions from them.

The most detailed data available on average salaries of full-time faculty in various disciplines are shown in Ta-

ble 1.<sup>22</sup> While the data permit comparison of the average salaries of professors and assistant professors in sixteen disciplines relative to those paid to faculty members of comparable rank in English language and literature, they are limited primarily to a set of public land grant universities and state colleges and cover only the decades between 1985 – 1986 and 2005 – 2006. As a consequence, they are, at best, indicators of salary differences existing mainly in public institutions, rather than in the full range of colleges and universities.

The first column of Table 1 shows that the salaries of full professors of English were lower in 2005 – 2006 than those of professors in eleven of the sixteen disciplines and fields on which data were available. Not surprisingly, disparities are greatest relative to professors of business, economics, and law. Furthermore, compared to two decades earlier, salary gaps have widened for professors of English relative to those in thirteen other disciplines.<sup>23</sup> Yet in fields such as communications and education, in which salaries have remained lower than

22 These data are collected annually by the Office of Institutional Research and Information Management at Oklahoma State University. The widely used annual reports on academic salaries published by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) show differences by rank and among colleges and universities, but they do not report salaries according to discipline. The most recent report of the AAUP for 2007 – 2008 confirms earlier findings that professors in private institutions routinely earn more than those in public institutions and that the gap between them has been widening; see <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/newsroom/2008pr/zreport.htm>.

23 Within the humanities, the salaries earned in philosophy have increased somewhat more quickly than those in English while those in

21 Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-8a.jpg&o=hrcoIVC.aspx\\_topIV8](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-8a.jpg&o=hrcoIVC.aspx_topIV8): Part IV. *Figure IV-8a: Distribution of Foundation Grant Monies (Millions of 2007 Dollars)*, by *Humanities Activity Type*, 2002.

Table 1

The Ratios of Average Salaries of Professors and Assistant Professors in English Language and Literature Compared to Average Salaries of Faculty Members in Other Disciplines, in 1985–1986 and 2005–2006

Discipline	Professor (1985–1986/2005–2006)	Assistant Professor (1985–1986/2005–2006)
Business	115.2/146.5	148.5/201.9
Communications	93.3/96.7	109.0/104.8
Computer/Info. Science	117.6/127.5	149.8/159.5
Economics	111.3/132.4	124.8/151.4
Education	92.0/96.2	105.3/104.3
Engineering	114.3/124.3	144.0/144.2
Fine Arts	90.4/88.9 <sup>a</sup>	98.9/96.4
Foreign Language	98.2/95.5	101.3/98.5
Health Professions	119.8/118.1	133.5/139.4
Law and Legal Studies	141.0/154.0	164.6/165.9
Library Science	99.4/97.9	108.9/109.1
Mathematics	104.4/106.8	113.0/116.2
Philosophy	101.6/109.0	98.7/97.7
Physical Sciences	108.0/112.1	116.6/118.4
Psychology	101.6/109.0	103.5/110.0
Social Sciences	103.3/114.1	108.2/118.0
All Discipline Average	105.1/112.0	119.8/125.5

a The average reported for professors of fine arts in the second year is for 2001–2002.

Source: “Financial Inequality in Higher Education,” *Academe*, March/April 2007, Tables D and E.

those in English, the gaps between them have narrowed. The second column shows that the magnitude of the decline has been greater for starting assistant professors than it has been for full professors. For example, in 2005–2006, assistant professors in business earned more than twice as much as those in English (2.019 times), as compared to their earning about one-and-a-half times more (1.485 times) two decades earlier. Thus humanists not

only earn less now relative to faculty in most other fields, but their pay has also grown more slowly. However, humanists are not the most poorly paid members of the professoriate: full professors in communications, education, fine arts, and library science earn even less than those in English and philosophy. Each of these four fields has a history of comparatively low status in universities and colleges and also relatively low compensation in the non-academic sector.

The magnitude of salary differences among fields has fluctuated over time and among types of institutions. Data from successive iterations of the *National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF)*

foreign languages have decreased, indicating internal variation in the humanities within an overall pattern of comparatively lower pay than pertains in other academic fields.

Table 2  
Average Salaries of Full-Time Instructional Faculty in Degree-Granting Institutions According to Field, Relative to the Average Salary of Full-Time Instructional Faculty in Degree-Granting Institutions in the Humanities

	Business	Engineering	Natural Sciences	Social Sciences	Fine Arts
Overall					
1987 – 1988	1.07	1.23	1.13	1.09	0.89
2003 – 2004	1.35	1.40	1.29	1.18	0.98
All Public					
1987 – 1988	1.04	1.17	1.10	1.05	0.90
2003 – 2004	1.35	1.37	1.27	1.19	1.02
All Private					
1987 – 1988	1.11	1.38	1.17	1.15	0.86
2003 – 2004	1.38	1.55	1.35	1.17	0.91
Research University Public					
1987 – 1988	1.26	1.32	1.25	1.14	0.87
2003 – 2004	1.61	1.49	1.41	1.28	1.04
Research University Private					
1987 – 1988	nr	nr	1.26	1.25	nr
2003 – 2004	1.75	1.55	1.43	1.38	0.92
Liberal Arts Colleges					
1987 – 1988	nr	nr	0.99	0.94	0.90
2003 – 2004	1.09	nr	1.01	1.07	0.89

“nr” indicates that sample sizes were too small to permit average salary in the field/category to be published. Source: Authors’ calculations from data reported from the *National Study of Postsecondary Faculty*, in *Digest of Education Statistics*, National Center for Education Statistics (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2006), Table 239.

that we have tabulated in Table 2 show how average salaries in fields other than the humanities changed relative to average salaries in the humanities between 1987 – 1988 and 2003 – 2004 in a much broader set of institutions than those Table 1 describes. *NSOPF*’s relatively small sample sizes do not allow for computing average salary by rank or by specific disciplines; thus the comparisons from *NSOPF* cover all ranks for broad disciplinary groups.

Table 2 shows first that average salaries in the humanities in this large sample of institutions have fallen in the period indicated relative to average salaries in all other fields (except for the fine arts); second, that salary differences between the humanities and other fields are larger in private than in public institutions; and third, that the extent of such differences has grown. Salaries are also much larger at research universities than at other academic institutions and

larger yet at private research universities. Thus the data in both Tables 1 and 2 indicate that faculty members in English and in humanities generally are paid less than their counterparts in other fields (with the exceptions we have noted). But it is not salaries paid to scientists or engineers that have grown the most, rather those paid to faculty in business, law, and economics. Growing salary differentials between the humanities and other fields may undermine faculty cohesion, but so far, public expressions of resentment about compensation differentials have surfaced more often among graduate students in the humanities than they have among faculty members.<sup>24</sup>

Salary differentials among fields are much smaller at liberal arts colleges and, over time, have not increased by much. This is the likely outcome of lower rates of faculty turnover in the colleges as compared with universities, the colleges' more limited resources, and the lower incidence of competitive recruitment of faculty members. However, since the emphasis on research at liberal arts colleges has been increasing, this may in the future raise top professorial salaries and increase the span between the highest and the lowest salaries that colleges pay.

Predicting the future supply of faculty members in the humanities is also complicated. Until recently, the production of PhDs in the humanities seems not to be in line with conventional assumptions about labor markets. These assumptions suggest that the declining rel-

ative salaries of faculty members in the relevant disciplines will lead to reductions in the number of students enrolling in PhD programs in these fields and ultimately to fewer degree recipients, over time, thus reducing the supply of new faculty. But this seems not to be the case at least in the recent past. Reliable data are not available on graduate student enrollments, but judging from the number of new recipients of doctoral degrees in the humanities (a fraction, of course, of enrollees), the supply of humanists has not been declining, despite the difficult job market. Indeed, it has grown since 1990, when 3,822 degrees were awarded; by 2000 this number grew to 5,634, and in 2006 it leveled off more or less at 5,576.<sup>25</sup> Humanists may

25 Thomas B. Hoffer, Mary Hess, Vincent Welch, Jr., and Kimberly Williams, *Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities: Summary Report 2006* (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 2007). Thomas B. Hoffer, Vincent Welch, Jr., Kristy Webber, Daniel Loew, and Isabel Guzman-Barron, *Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities: Summary Report 2005* (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 2006). See also Doug Steward, "Report on the Survey of Earned Doctorates 2006 NORC 2007," January 7, 2008; available at [www.norc.org/projects/survey+of+earned+doctorates.htm](http://www.norc.org/projects/survey+of+earned+doctorates.htm). The most recent data available from the *Survey of Earned Doctorates* shows that doctoral production in the humanities fell by 4.6 percent between 2006 and 2007, but since the absolute numbers reported for both years are not consistent with earlier reports, the validity of these data is still unclear. Doug Lederman, "Doctorate Production Continues to Grow"; available at [www.insidehighered.com/news.2008/11/24/doctorates](http://www.insidehighered.com/news.2008/11/24/doctorates). Since degree recipients began graduate school somewhere between six to eleven years earlier (given the long time-to-degree in the humanities), their plans may have been influenced by the condition of labor markets at that time. But we also know that current labor markets affect the timing of completion and, thus, completion rates.

24 Relations between academic institutions and teaching assistants seeking improved pay and conditions of work have often been contentious, but they seem not to be focused on differences in pay between assistants in different fields but on overall compensation and benefits. See, for example, "A Call to Arms for Academic Labor," 1–10; available at [www.insidehighered.com/2008/01/10](http://www.insidehighered.com/2008/01/10).

or may not abide by the tenets of Mills's *homo economicus*, but there is reason to expect that the number of PhDs may contract soon if only because leading universities, especially those with a history of admitting larger numbers of graduate students in the humanities, have reduced the size of entering cohorts so as to improve the financial support they offer and in some measure to improve the chances their graduates have of getting jobs after graduation.<sup>26</sup>

A second part of the employment story is the availability of jobs in the humanities relative to the number of job seekers, while a third part is the nature of the kinds of jobs that are available – particularly whether they are tenure-track appointments or not and whether they are full- or part-time. To a large extent, employment opportunities in the academy and in various fields are driven by student demand,<sup>27</sup> which, in turn, is reflected in course enrollments. Course enrollment data are not available for a large sample of institutions, but data on the number of degrees granted in the

26 Ronald G. Ehrenberg, Harriet Zuckerman, Jeffrey Groen, and Sharon M. Brucker, "Changing the Education of Scholars: An Introduction to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Graduate Education Initiative," in *Doctoral Education and the Faculty of the Future*, ed. Ronald G. Ehrenberg and Charlotte V. Kuh (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

27 Although course enrollments are strong determinants of employment, adjustments attributable to changes in demand are not instantaneous, and other factors such as graduate student enrollment and the "prestige" graduate departments also are important. See Sarah Turner and William R. Johnson, "Resource Allocation in Higher Education: Why Don't Administrators Satisfy Student Demand?" (University of Virginia, Department of Economics, 2007).

full array of academic majors are routinely reported by the U.S. Department of Education and are an indirect proxy for student demand.<sup>28</sup>

Judging from this measure, students' interest in the humanities has neither been in ascent nor in retreat. During the period between 1990 – 2004, the share of bachelor's degrees that were granted in the humanities overall increased and then decreased, ending the period at about the same level as it was at the beginning<sup>29</sup> while the share of bachelor's degrees granted in the arts grew somewhat and those in the sciences by only a single percentage point.<sup>30</sup>

If the number of majors is a reasonable proxy for employment opportunities for faculty members, the shares of faculty employed in the humanities, arts, and natural sciences should have changed little or not at all since no significant changes in the distribution of student majors occurred during the period. In fact, the *NSOPF* data in Table 3a

28 Using the major fields of graduates as a substitute for enrollments is obviously problematic. Some fields have large numbers of enrollees but few majors as the result of students being required to take courses as part of distribution requirements: the sciences come readily to mind as an instance. Even when requirements are not the sources of enrollments, large numbers of students interested in taking particular courses, for example in foreign languages, do not necessarily result in increasing numbers of foreign language majors.

29 As a share of total degrees granted, the humanities remain popular majors. The humanities' share of degrees is only lower than the shares of business and the social sciences.

30 Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=II-1b.jpg&o=hrcoIIA.aspx\\_\\_topII1](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=II-1b.jpg&o=hrcoIIA.aspx__topII1): Part II. *Figure II-1b: Shares of All Bachelor's Degrees Awarded in Selected Academic Fields, 1987 – 2004*.



Table 3a  
 Percentages of Instructional Faculty and Staff in Degree-Granting Institutions in Various Fields of the Arts and Sciences, Business, and Engineering, Nationwide

	1992	1998	2003
Full-Time			
Business	7.6	6.9	6.3
Engineering	4.6	4.5	4.9
Natural Sciences	19.2	19.9	22.2
Social Sciences	11.0	10.4	10.3
Fine Arts	6.0	5.9	6.3
Humanities	14.0	14.4	13.2
Other	37.6	38.0	36.8
Part-Time			
Business	9.2	7.6	8.5
Engineering	3.1	2.2	2.7
Natural Sciences	16.0	15.7	16.9
Social Sciences	9.0	9.9	7.9
Fine Arts	8.7	9.2	9.0
Humanities	15.9	17.8	15.0
Other	38.9	37.6	40.0

“Other” includes agriculture and home economics, communications, education, health sciences, law, occupation specific programs, and all other programs.

Source: *Digest of Education Statistics*, National Center for Education Statistics (Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, 2006), Table 238, and *Digest of Education Statistics*, National Center for Education Statistics (Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, 2003), Table 237.

confirm this conjecture. The distributions of full- and part-time faculty members employed in various fields in 1992, 1998, and 2003 shifted by only a few percentage points over the decade under consideration.<sup>31</sup>

The percentage of faculty who work part-time is another gauge of employment prospects. The 1990s were a period of increasing use of part-time faculty nationwide, in response to some extent to the financial problems colleges and universities had begun to experience. Indeed, the data presented in Table 3b

show that between 1992 and 2003 the share of faculty in the humanities who worked part-time did rise (by 2.1 percent), in the arts (by 1.5 percent), and in business (by 5.5 percent). In the sciences, however, the share of part-timers remained constant, and in engineering it declined. These changes, like those in the distribution of faculty among fields, are small and thus provide little evidence that employment options have worsened more in the humanities than in other fields. Moreover, increases in part-time employment may or may not signal deterioration in job opportunities. In some fields, particularly in business and the professions, practitioners often teach part-time in their own special fields. In

31 Interpretation of these percentage changes should be tentative since the data are subject to considerable sampling variation.

Table 3b  
Percentages of Part-Time Instructional Faculty and Staff in Degree-Granting Institutions in Various Fields of the Arts and Sciences, Business, and Engineering, Nationwide

	1992	1998	2003
Business	46.5	45.0	51.0
Engineering	32.2	27.1	29.6
Natural Sciences	37.2	37.0	37.2
Social Sciences	36.8	41.4	37.4
Fine Arts	50.9	53.4	52.4
Humanities	44.8	47.8	46.9

Source: See Table 3a.

the humanities, however, part-time employees are often hired to teach introductory courses in literature, foreign languages, and English composition; they are usually paid modestly, on a per course basis, to teach large numbers of students, and often lack the benefits typically available to regular members of the faculty.

Non-tenure-track faculty also staff high-enrollment courses. Despite their sometimes being full-time, they, like their part-time colleagues, have no assurance of employment long term. A soon-to-be published study of non-tenure-track faculty in major U.S. universities reports that the number of such faculty members is growing and that undergraduate teaching needs drive the fields and disciplines in which they are appointed. In the arts and sciences, these are English, Spanish, and writing/composition, as well as economics and mathematics. The growing number of these “teaching specialists” is therefore not a phenomenon confined to the humanities.<sup>32</sup> The effects of shifting teaching obligations to non-tenure-track fac-

ulty on the quality of education being offered and on the satisfaction of those who hold these jobs have only begun to be explored. In light of straitened academic budgets, the use of part-time and non-tenure-track faculty as a means of reducing the costs of teaching may well increase.

Perhaps the most discussed and most lamented features of the job market in the humanities are the shortage of jobs for new PhDs, the shrinking number of tenure-track jobs, and the prolonged period during which these conditions have prevailed. Prospects for entry level academic jobs<sup>33</sup> depend, like jobs in general, on demand, specifically on enrollments, as we just noted. They also depend on prevailing student-faculty ratios, the number of new PhDs seeking academic jobs, the number of professors who retire, the number who are

32 See John G. Cross and Edie N. Goldenberg, *Who Teaches, Who Decides, Who Cares? The Rise of the Teaching Specialist in Higher Education* (forthcoming), 21.

33 See William G. Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa, *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences: A Study of Factors Affecting Demand and Supply, 1987 to 2012* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) for a thorough discussion of the multitude of forces affecting the state of the academic job market. The great majority of PhDs in the humanities works in colleges and universities, unlike many degree recipients in the sciences and engineering.

replaced, and the extent to which academic institutions allocate resources to expand departments at the lower ranks or elect to contract them. Thus budgetary decisions universities and colleges make strongly affect labor market opportunities for young scholars.

The availability of academic posts at all professorial ranks in English, languages, and history is registered in job listings published by the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the American Historical Association (AHA), respectively. These lists provide some indication of the availability of jobs but are not definitive sources since not all academic positions are posted nor are all those posted actually available.

Years of difficult job markets in the humanities have led to large pools of job seekers, with the result that new PhDs compete for jobs with others who have “been on the market” for long periods of time or who are seeking better jobs than they have. For example, a 2004 MLA survey of hiring outcomes for tenure-track positions listed at four-year institutions showed that about two-thirds were filled by candidates no longer enrolled in graduate school at the time they were hired. These more seasoned job seekers included those working full-time in non-tenure-track positions, in part-time positions, occupants of tenure-track positions elsewhere, or post-doctoral appointments.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, our own research indicates that considerable job mobility occurs soon after the first appointment has been secured. Based upon a survey of over 6,700 PhDs in the humanities and related social sciences who earned degrees from thirteen

leading universities, just over half (58 percent) who had full-time, non-tenure-track positions at four-year institutions right after earning their degrees had moved in the next three years into full-time, tenure-track posts, many at institutions other than those where they got their first jobs.<sup>35</sup>

As Table 4 shows, the number of placements made in jobs the MLA listed has fluctuated substantially through cycles of comparative scarcity and plenty over the more than quarter century for which data are available. But overall, the table shows an upward trend in placements in both fields since the late 1990s.<sup>36</sup> Table 4 also shows that the share of new PhDs receiving tenure-track positions at four-year institutions (via jobs listed with the MLA) has fluctuated over the whole period covered but has increased since the late 1990s in both English and foreign languages.

While the MLA data suggest that the job market in the aggregate has recovered somewhat in recent years, the number of job openings in the various specialty areas of English and in different foreign languages has not risen uniformly<sup>37</sup> and they do not necessarily match variations in the specialties of new PhDs or of job seekers, more generally. Thus while the data indicate job market prospects in general seem to be improving, it does not follow that this is so across all the specialties.

35 Ronald E. Ehrenberg, Harriet Zuckerman, Sharon Brucker, and Jeffrey R. Groen, *Educating Scholars: The Effectiveness and Quality of Doctoral Programs in the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming), chap. 9.

36 Ibid., Figure 1. The MLA Job Information List is confined to posts for PhDs primarily for full-time jobs in four-year academic institutions.

37 Ibid., Figures O-1 and O-2.

34 *Report on Trends in the MLA Job Market Information List* (Modern Language Association, September 2007); available at [www.mla.org/jilreporttext11007pdf](http://www.mla.org/jilreporttext11007pdf).

Table 4  
Shares of New PhDs in English and Foreign Languages Receiving Tenure-Track Appointments  
at Four-Year Institutions in the Year They Received Their Degrees

English

Year	Number New PhDs (1)	Number Tenure-Track Placements (2)	Share (2)/(1)
1977	1079	466	.43
1978	1027	481	.47
1979	911	391	.43
1980	951	379	.40
1982	771	326	.42
1984	734	298	.41
1987	669	334	.50
1993	948	491	.52
1995	1079	411	.38
1998	1078	400	.37
2001	978	431	.44
2004	960	459	.48

Foreign Languages

Year	Number New PhDs (1)	Number Tenure-Track Placements (2)	Share (2)/(1)
1977	728	310	.43
1978	637	299	.47
1979	648	263	.41
1980	535	252	.47
1982	491	185	.38
1984	492	237	.48
1987	444	224	.50
1993	562	285	.51
1995	594	283	.48
1998	652	270	.41
2001	620	276	.45
2004	587	268	.46

Source: *Report on Trends in the MLA Job Information List* (Modern Language Association, September 2007),  
Figures 6 and 7, available at [www.mla.org](http://www.mla.org).

Similar data on job openings are compiled annually by the AHA and include listings for junior and senior academic positions, for public historians, and some postdoctoral positions. Like the MLA listings, the AHA postings are primarily for full-time jobs, but information on the tenure-track status of positions is often not given. AHA's periodic summaries and analyses of job list-

ings in its newsletter *Perspectives*<sup>38</sup> show that the number of new PhDs exceeded the number of job openings listed each year between 1991 – 1992 and 2002 – 2003. Since job seekers in history, like those in English and foreign languages,

38 See, for example, American Historical Association, *Perspectives*, January 2008, available at [www.historians.org](http://www.historians.org).

are not confined to new PhDs, and not all jobs that are listed are actually filled, these data underestimate how difficult the job market in history has been. Between 2003 – 2004 and 2005 – 2006, however, the job market seems to have improved somewhat, as the number of new job listings exceeded the number of new PhDs being produced.<sup>39</sup> But since job seekers outnumber new PhDs, it is unclear how much improvement has actually occurred.

An alternative measure of the state of the job market for new PhDs in history comes from data collected annually in the *Survey of Earned Doctorates*, which tallies the number of PhDs who have “definite employment” at the time of being awarded the degree. The share of new PhDs in history who have reported having jobs when they finished their degrees has trended upward since the mid-1990s, increasing by about 10 percent.<sup>40</sup> However, as in English and foreign languages, what is true in the aggregate is not true for new PhDs specializing in various subfields of history. More job openings are listed in Middle Eastern, African, and Asian history, but specialists in American and British history have confronted much less favorable employment options. It is difficult to predict whether modest improvements in job opportunities in English, languages, and history will be erased by faculty cutbacks due to deteriorating state budgets and the effects of the retreat of financial markets on college and university resources. This is not

unlikely since some of the most heavily endowed universities have already elected to impose hiring freezes.

The expenditures universities make on their libraries are the third source of evidence on their investments in the humanities. But since libraries serve all fields, they are not indicators of the well-being of the humanities specifically, however central a role libraries play in humanistic inquiry. This said, there is marked concern that university libraries are not keeping up with the rising costs of serials, digital and paper, especially in the sciences, and that they have cut back on book purchases, especially scholarly monographs, as a consequence.

Humanists’ concerns about the adequacy of library budgets are associated with their distinctive practices of scholarship and publication. Unlike the sciences, humanistic scholarship relies heavily on library collections and archives, often not only on their home campuses but elsewhere as well. In contrast to the sciences, which emphasize publication in peer-reviewed journals, in most disciplines in the humanities, prime attention goes to the publication of scholarly monographs and synthetic books since deeply researched and rigorously argued projects usually require the scale of explication book publication offers. Thus the gold standard in the sciences for judging promotion and tenure is publication in major peer-reviewed journals, while in the humanities promotion and tenure decisions are strongly influenced by publication of books by prestigious university presses,<sup>41</sup> although in some humanistic disciplines,

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid. This measure tends to underestimate the actual number of new PhDs who successfully find jobs. This is why examining job holding three months after the degree rather than confining it to the date of the degree is a wise research strategy.

41 There are of course exceptions to this rule: publication with a serious commercial press has its own cachet.

publication in peer-reviewed journals also counts. The emphasis in the sciences on papers led to their being termed “papyrocentric,”<sup>42</sup> which in turn suggests that that the humanities’ preference for book publication might permit them to be termed “bibliocentric,” notwithstanding the use of this term in other scholarly contexts.

It is the “bibliocentrism” of most of the humanities that sharpens their concerns about the adequacy of library budgets, the allocations made within them, the difficulties young humanists have in finding publication outlets for their work, shrinking markets for university press monograph publications, and what is seen as the need libraries have to reduce book acquisitions in order to pay for increasingly costly serials.

Does the evidence on expenditures support these concerns? Yes and no. Trend data show a major expansion in purchases by academic libraries generally in the decade between 1996 and 2006, but even so, rates of growth in library expenditures were greater for serials than for monograph purchases: the former increased 5.1 percent and the latter 1.8 percent. Research libraries specifically also spent more on serials as compared to monographs. Between

1986 and 2006, their average expenditures on serials rose by 7.5 percent annually while expenditures on monographs rose 3.1 percent annually. Taking into account the differing rates of price inflation for monographs and serials, monograph purchases remained essentially flat, increasing by 0.1 percent annually, while serial purchases grew by 2.1 percent annually. However, these data cover a full forty years of library history and do not show the major expansion in expenditures that occurred between 1996 and 2006. But even in this briefer period of increased spending, rates of growth in expenditures for serials were much greater than they were for books; the former grew at 5.1 percent annually and the latter at 1.8 percent. Thus in both the longer and the shorter term, despite expansion in library budgets, their monograph purchases – so important to humanists – grew far more slowly than purchases of serials.

But the significance of these data is less clear than it may seem for a number of reasons: as we noted, serial purchases benefit scholars and scientists in all fields, and the Association of Research Libraries’ (ARL) data are problematic since comparisons they permit are quite limited. Starting in 1999 – 2000, the ARL elected to include the expenditures on electronic resources in its serials data, thus producing a substantial increase in reported serials purchases. In addition, monograph prices and inflation rates vary widely across subject matter areas: the average list price of a humanities monograph, for example, is less than half that of a physical and life sciences monograph. Between 2000 and 2005 the average price of a scholarly monograph in the humanities remained essentially constant in real terms. In contrast, during that same period, the average price of a mono-

42 Derek J. de Solla Price dubbed the sciences “papyrocentric” and engineering “papyrophobic” in “Is Technology Historically Independent of Science? A Study in Statistical Historiography,” *Technology and Culture* 6 (1965): 553–568. More recently, the term *papyrocentric* has surfaced in literature on bibliometrics, for example in Stephen Harnad’s discussion of the “papyrocentric attitude”; see <http://english.ttu.edu/Kairos/2.1/features/brent/papyro.htm>. The term *bibliocentric* appears to have been used mainly by scholars of religion, who refer to religions that accord prime authority to books as bibliocentric against those that give primacy to revelation, for example.

graph in the physical sciences increased in real terms.<sup>43</sup> To complicate comparisons further, average monograph prices also differ according to the subject matter of books, ranging, in 2005, from less than \$30 for literary titles to over \$90 for “language” titles; between 2000 and 2005, average prices in real terms fell for the former but increased for the latter.<sup>44</sup> Absent information on how monograph purchases by libraries have varied over time for the sciences, social sciences, the humanities, and other branches of higher learning, and within the humanities, for its component disciplines, it is not possible to say definitively how the humanities have been affected in comparison to other fields or by recent changes in the expenditure patterns of academic libraries.

Much anecdotal evidence is offered for reductions in the sales of scholarly monographs published by university presses and for reductions in the size of monograph press runs. These are said to be in the vicinity of several hundred, rather than the average of a thousand or so that was the norm two or three decades ago.<sup>45</sup> This is consistent

with the claim that fewer libraries acquire all major publications of university presses than once did. But while such anecdotes are not entirely at odds with data showing the absence of growth in expenditures on monographs, they do not seem to square with the Blackwell’s reports showing an increasing number of book titles being available in the humanities.<sup>46</sup> There is no publicly accessible, industry-wide evidence for these trends in the number of titles released, printed, and sold because publishers, for-profit and nonprofit, consider such data proprietary.

In marked contrast to the complicated and often incomplete evidence available on publishing in the humanities generally, Hilary Ballon’s and Mariët Westermann’s study of art history provides detailed data and informative analysis of publishing in that field, including changes in publication practices of university presses.<sup>47</sup> Art history, they observe, is fortunate in having an audience for its books that goes well beyond the academy, and this is consistent with the increase in new titles Blackwell’s recommends to research libraries for purchase in the fine arts.<sup>48</sup> However, a combina-

43 Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-12c.jpg&o=hrcoIVD.aspx\\_\\_topIV12](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-12c.jpg&o=hrcoIVD.aspx__topIV12): Part IV. *Figure IV-12c: Average List Price of New Titles, by Subject, 2000 – 2005.*

44 Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-12d.jpg&o=hrcoIVD.aspx\\_\\_topIV12](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-12d.jpg&o=hrcoIVD.aspx__topIV12): Part IV. *Figure IV-12d: Average List Price of New Humanities Titles, by Category, 2000 – 2005.*

45 If these claims are so, it is still not evident what they mean. One publisher recently remarked that the number of books in press runs is being curtailed, but the number of press runs per book has increased because it is relatively easy and inexpensive to add new press runs with current print technology.

46 These observations may not be contradictory, as one of our readers suggested, since Blackwell’s reports on the number of new titles released, not the number of books printed or sold.

47 Hilary Ballon and Mariët Westermann, “Art History and Its Publications in the Electronic Age” (Council on Library and Information Resources, 2006), 45 – 46; available at <http://cnx.org/content/col10376/1.1>.

48 Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-12b.jpg&o=hrcoIVD.aspx\\_\\_topIV12](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-12b.jpg&o=hrcoIVD.aspx__topIV12): Part IV. *Figure IV-12b: New Titles in the Humanities, by Category, 2000 – 2005.*

tion of other factors has led important university presses, such as Cambridge and Princeton, to reduce the number of monographs they publish in art history; these include insufficient sales to cover expenditures, the high cost of permissions and fees, and the expense of producing books with illustrations. Those presses remaining in the field have turned increasingly to publishing exhibition catalogs, which come with subsidies from museums. These trends might suggest that younger scholars in art history are having increasing difficulty in finding publishers for their books, which are usually highly specialized monographs. However, the ratio of books published to the number of PhDs awarded in art history increased between 1985 and 1999, and only fell back to 1989 levels in 2004.<sup>49</sup> Future publication opportunities in art history cannot be forecast with certainty; but it is clear that monographs directed at specialized audiences have become “scarcer because of the linked phenomena of decreasing print runs, increasing costs-per-copy, and rising prices.”<sup>50</sup>

In short, the evidence is mixed on the willingness of universities and colleges to invest in the humanities when account is taken of their expenditures on libraries, on serials and books, on scholars' publication prospects, and the fortunes of university presses. These data are exceptionally complicated and thus not a clear basis for pessimism or optimism among bibliocentric humanists.

49 Ballou and Westermann speculate that recent declines in the ratio have contributed to the sense of “crisis” scholars report; “Art History and Its Publications in the Electronic Age,” 25–26.

50 Ibid., 19.

The support the humanities receive in public institutions of higher education merits special attention. Many public universities, as we noted earlier, have experienced marked reductions in state funding while facing increasing costs. They are pressed to help their local economies grow and confront the rising costs of science, especially if they are or aspire to be major research institutions.

How public and private universities compare on three indicators may shed light on the status of the humanities in each class of institution: the graduate student stipends they provide, rankings of the prestige of their doctoral programs, and library expenditures. These indicators are far from perfect, but they convey something of the relative status of the humanities in each kind of institution.

Among universities generally, graduate student stipends are higher in the sciences and engineering than they are in the humanities according to a 2004 study in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.<sup>51</sup> This difference is not simply a result of fellowships in the sciences paying more because they cover twelve months rather than nine, as is ordinarily the case in the humanities. It reflects the major commitment the federal government has made to training scientists. The National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and a variety of other agencies support graduate fellowships and training grants with the result that the great majority of graduate students in the sciences and engineering are fully financed. Some federal money is also available for the education of humanists, but it is given primarily through fellowships the Foreign Language Area Studies Fellowship Program

51 Scott Smallwood, “The Stipend Gap,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 15, 2004.



awards. These are supplemented by a small number of grants from private foundations, but by and large, universities themselves are the main supporters of graduate students in the humanities.<sup>52</sup>

The *Chronicle* study also reported that graduate stipends tend to be higher at private than at public universities of comparable quality. We also know that leading private universities we studied are more likely to fund all or nearly all of their graduate students in the humanities with multiyear “packages.” They provide four years of support and sometimes more: some cover several summers and, some, research travel. But competition for graduate students considered most promising is intense in the humanities, which has led major public universities (and some less wealthy private ones) to reduce the number of students they admit and to concentrate their fellowship funds on a small number of outsized offers comparable in size to those private institutions make in order to recruit at least some of the graduate students they want most. Yet most of their graduate students must teach, receive smaller stipends, and have less predictable support.<sup>53</sup>

Much more important than the size of graduate stipends in assessing how well the humanities have fared in public universities is the scholarly quality of the graduate programs they offer. That program quality and its measurement are highly contested notions is more or less a given. Yet studies of “quality” go back to the 1920s and have become

enormously influential in higher education. The most extensive and the most reliable of these have come from the National Research Council (NRC). It would have been highly desirable for us to have been able to draw on the newest and still much-awaited NRC evaluation due to be released in winter 2009. Instead, we rely on the less satisfactory and not truly comparable evidence on “quality” of graduate programs provided by the 2005/2006 *U.S. News & World Reports (USNWR)* ratings<sup>54</sup> and compare them to the 1995 NRC ratings. This allows us to determine very roughly whether, in the intervening decade, humanities programs at public universities held their own, that is, continued to be at or near the top in broad categories of rankings in the two time periods.

Table 5 shows the percentage of public universities in 1995 and 2005/2006 that were ranked in the five, ten, and twenty-five top-ranked programs in five academic disciplines that *USNWR* rates (economics, English, history, mathematics, and physics). Some modest slippage in the number of public university programs in English is apparent, but no such changes occurred in top-ranked history departments. Indeed no deterioration seems to have occurred in the shares of public universities in the top five and top ten in mathematics, physics, or economics, although there were some small shifts downward in the next fifteen. On balance, these data suggest

54 Criticism of the methods used in the *U.S. News & World Reports* rankings continues and focuses on their limited coverage, validity, and reliability. For example, in the humanities, only the fields of English and history are included in *USNWR* rankings. Both the 1995 and 2005/2006 rankings are based on reputational surveys of faculty in the fields, but these surveys are not identical, nor are the sampling methods used the same or the methods of administration or response rates.

52 See [grants.nih.gov/training/nrsa.htm](http://grants.nih.gov/training/nrsa.htm).

53 Fellowship “packages” usually carry requirements for teaching and service as research assistants. Dissertation fellowships remain hard to come by. See Ehrenberg et al., “Changing the Education of Scholars.”

Table 5  
Percentages of Doctoral Programs in Public Universities Ranked in the Top 5, Top 10, and Top 25 in Selected Disciplines in 1995 and 2005/2006<sup>d</sup>

	Top 5 1995	Top 5 2005/2006	Top 10 1995	Top 10 2005/2006	Top 25 1995	Top 25 2005/2006
Economics	0.0	0.0	20.0	20.0	36.0	30.8 <sup>c</sup>
English	33.3	20.0	20.0	18.2 <sup>b</sup>	48.0	48.0
History	20.0	20.0	30.0	30.0	48.0	48.0
Mathematics	20.0	20.0	20.0	20.0	48.0	40.0
Physics	20.0	16.7 <sup>a</sup>	30.0	33.3 <sup>b</sup>	56.0	57.7 <sup>c</sup>

a b c Denominator was more than 5, 10, or 25, respectively, because of ties in the rankings.

d Mathematics and physics were evaluated in 2005 and the other fields were evaluated in 2006.

Source: Authors' calculations from Marvin L. Goldberger, Brendan A. Maher, and Pamela E. Flattau, eds., *Research Doctoral Programs in the United States: Continuity and Change* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1995) and *2007 America's Best Graduate Schools* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. News and World Reports, 2006).

that in English and history, public university programs remained strong, as they did in mathematics and physics.

In light of the escalation of endowments of top tier private universities, and thus competitive advantage in recruiting of faculty, it is surprising that so little change has occurred in their standing compared to public universities.<sup>55</sup> It is possible that the measures we used were too crude and too limited to detect erosion in the assessed quality of programs in public universities or that faculty members in the humanities were unmoved by the offers they received or that that significant change occurred before 1995. It is entirely possible that public universities "protected" their major departments, both in the humanities and other central fields, and the impact of funding cutbacks was felt elsewhere, in disciplines less central to university missions or in myriad other activities in which public universities engage. The results of the National Research Council's new evaluation of doctoral programs will shed important light on the relative strength

55 "College and University Endowments over \$200-Million," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 31, 2007.

of the humanities in public and private universities since its coverage of the humanities and other fields is far more extensive and far more detailed than *USNWR's*.<sup>56</sup>

Earlier we noted the special importance libraries have for humanist scholars and widespread concerns about the adequacy of library expenditures while also observing that libraries are important to all disciplines, albeit in different ways. Table 6 displays the number of public universities ranked by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in the top ten, top twenty-five, and top fifty in terms of total library expenditures from 1965 – 1966 to 2005 – 2006.<sup>57</sup> It shows no change in the number of public university libraries represented among the top ten in spending in 2005 – 2006 compared with 1965 – 1966. However, by the

56 Closing of doctoral programs may also signal problems. The University of Florida announced the elimination of its philosophy department in spring 2008; see *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 2008.

57 We chose to compare overall expenditures even though ARL ranks libraries on a variety of measures, including, but not limited to, the number of volumes they hold, monographs purchased, staff salaries, and expenditures on serials and electronic resources. Most ARL sta-

Table 6

Number of Libraries in Public Universities Ranked in the Top 10, Top 25, and Top 50 in Terms of Total Library Expenditures

Year	Top 10	Top 25	Top 50
1965 – 1966	5	17	33
1975 – 1976	7	16	35
1985 – 1986	5	16	33
1995 – 1996	4	13	31
2005 – 2006	5	13	28

Source: Authors' calculations from *ARL Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, various years).

end of this forty-year period, the number of public universities ranked in the top twenty-five and the top fifty was substantially lower than it was at the start, with the decline concentrated in the second twenty-five. Whether having local access to special library materials, in this era of frequent travel, interlibrary loans, and increasingly available research materials on the Web, makes a significant difference in the ability of humanists to pursue their scholarly projects is not at all clear, but the support of the great majority of public university libraries does bear watching in connection with other indicators of the health of the humanities.

What, then, has been learned from this assembly of evidence on funding of the humanities? Does the current state of affairs suggest that the humanities are encountering harder times now than in the past, or that nothing much is new? On balance, there is some cause for optimism, some for pessimism, and much that leads to uneasiness. Things are new in extent if not in kind. It seems clear that the humanities have failed to find many eager patrons outside the acade-

my. Trends in government support, concentrated almost entirely in the NEH, are disquieting. While the overall amount the NEH has to spend has hardly varied since 1996, less and less of it has gone to the academic humanities and more and more to the public humanities. Funding for “the humanities” from private foundations, in the aggregate, has been increasing, but the lion’s share has recently gone to museums and historical societies, deserving institutions that are related to the academic humanities but are not quite of them. The trend D’Arms noted in 1995, of the costs of the humanities being shifted from the federal government to universities and colleges, continues today. On a far greater scale, the same shift of costs to universities has been occurring in the sciences. Although federal research budgets for some of the sciences have increased, they have not for others, and the costs of scientific research universities are now assuming are increasingly large. Thus the stage is set for heightened competition for institutional support among the sciences, the humanities, and all the other fields that are pursued in research intensive universities.

That undergraduates’ interest in studying the humanities has not waned in recent years, at least as gauged by the share of bachelor’s degrees being earned

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istics are roughly comparable from 1963 onward, when efforts were made to make the data contained in its reports equivalent.

in these fields, is encouraging. So, too, is the modest growth in the number of new doctorates granted in the humanities in the face of the relative declines in faculty salaries. Top graduate programs continue to be eager to recruit the best students they can and now provide multiyear packages of support to those that they accept, although financial assistance for graduate students in the humanities remains inadequate in a great many institutions.

Evidence on employment indicates little change in the share of full-time faculty members in American universities who had jobs in the humanities in 1992 and 2003, while the share of humanities faculty employed in part-time and in non-tenure-track positions grew. It seems likely that changes are responses to enrollment pressures rather than to systematic targeting of the humanities in efforts to economize. The poor job market that has persisted for several decades in English, foreign languages, and history seems to have eased somewhat, but demand for and supply of specialists are not well matched. Thus, labor market prospects for humanists are mixed and no one knows what effects the financial crisis of 2008 will have on university and college faculty hiring. However, there is little reason to suppose that the large differences between private and public institutions in salaries and job conditions, and between the humanities and other fields, will fade. There is reason to assume that strong pressures will continue in the academy, particularly in public institutions, to find ways to teach students more cheaply as enrollments grow.

Library purchases of books have grown, but far more slowly than their purchases of serials, and it appears that the number of specialized monographs they buy has contracted, though more

so in some disciplines in the humanities than others. The evidence on publishing opportunities in the humanities is exceptionally complicated and requires far more systematic study than has been done to date.

One thing is clear: the support the academic humanities can now call upon is the product of a great many forces operating outside the academy and within it. It is therefore unlikely that improved support can be easily achieved. Furthermore, other matters in higher education, such as increasing access to college, providing sufficient financial aid for students, and dealing with its growing costs, have far higher priority.

More broadly, the major financial problems the nation is confronting have already begun to affect institutions of higher education adversely. How these pressures will play out in the longer term is not yet clear. The benefits the academic humanities confer on society are not understood well enough, by a sufficient number, to justify the belief that much better days are ahead.<sup>58</sup>

58 Since this paper was written, the financial markets collapsed, leading colleges and universities, state governments, and their supporters to experience major losses. This should be kept in mind when considering our analysis.

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