

The Burden and Beauty of the Humanities



BY WILFRED M. MCCLAY

Lamentations about the sad state of the humanities in modern America have a familiar, indeed almost ritualistic, quality about them. The humanities are among those unquestionably nice endeavors, like animal shelters and tree-planting projects, about which nice people invariably say nice things. But there gets to be something vaguely annoying about all this cloying uplift. One longs for the moral clarity of a swift kick in the rear.

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Enter the eminent literary scholar Stanley Fish, author of a regular blog for the *New York Times*, who addressed the subject with a kicky piece entitled "Will the Humanities Save Us?" (January 6, 2008). Where there is Fish there will always be bait, for nothing pleases this contrarian professor more than double-crossing his readers' expectations and enticing them into a heated debate, and he did not disappoint.

Fish asserted that the humanities can't save us, and in fact they don't really "do" anything, other than give pleasure to "those who enjoy them." Those of us involved with the humanities should reconcile ourselves to the futility of it all, and embrace our uselessness as a badge of honor. At least that way we can claim that we are engaged in "an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental to some larger good."

This sustained shrug elicited a blast of energetic and mostly negative response from the *Times'* online readers. To read through the hundreds of comments is to be reminded that Americans do seem to have a strong and abiding respect for the

humanities. For many of these readers, Fish's remarks failed the test of moral seriousness, and failed to come to terms with exactly what it is that makes the humanities special and places upon them a particular task, a particular burden, in the life of our civilization.

What does it mean to speak of the "burden" of the humanities? The phrase can be taken several ways. First, it can refer to the weight the humanities themselves have to bear, the things that they are supposed to accomplish on behalf of us, our nation, or our civilization. But it can also refer to the near opposite: the ways in which the humanities are a source of responsibility for us, and their recovery and cultivation and preservation our job, even our duty.

Both of these senses of burden—the humanities as instructor, and the humanities as task—need to be included in our sense of the problem. The humanities, rightly pursued and rightly ordered, can do things, and teach things, and preserve things, and illuminate things, which can be accomplished in no other way. It is the humanities that instruct us in the range and depth of human possibility, including our immense capacity for both goodness and depravity. It is the humanities that nourish and sustain our shared memories, and connect us with our civilization's past and with those who have come before us. It is the humanities that teach us how to ask what the good life is for us humans, and guide us in the search for civic ideals and institutions that will make the good life possible.

The humanities are imprecise by their very nature. But that does not mean they are a form of intellectual finger painting. The knowledge they convey is not a rough, preliminary substitute for what psychology, chemistry, molecular biology, and physics will eventually resolve with greater finality. They are an accurate reflection of the subject they treat, the most accurate possible. In the long run, we cannot do without them.

But they are not indestructible, and will not be sustainable without active attention from us. The recovery and repair of the humanities—and the restoration of the kind of insight they provide—is an enormous task.

First, we should try to impart some clarity to the term "humanities." It is astounding to discover how little attention is given to this task. More often than not, we fall back upon essentially bureaucratic definitions that reflect the ways in which the modern research university parcels out office space. The commonest definition in circulation is a long sentence from a congressional statute—the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, the legislation that established the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. As you might expect, this rendition is wanting in a certain grace. But here it is:

The term "humanities" includes, but is not limited to, the study and interpretation of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; compara-

tive religion; ethics; the history, criticism, and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.

In some respects, this provides a useful beginning. But doesn't it tacitly assume that we already understand the thing being defined? Rather than answer the larger question, a long list merely evades it. One doesn't capture the animating goals

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of a manufacturing firm merely by listing all of the firm's discrete activities, from procurement of raw materials to collection of accounts receivable. The task of definition requires that some overarching purpose be taken into account.

It is a bad sign that defenders of the humanities become tongue-tied so quickly when a layperson asks what the humanities are, and why we should value them. Sometimes the answers are downright silly. At a meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies two years ago in Philadelphia, the subject was "Reinvigorating the Humanities," but the discussion was anything but vigorous. Consider this witticism from Don Randel, then the president of the University of Chicago and president-elect of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation: "When the lights go out and our friends in science haven't developed a national energy policy, they'll be out of business. We, with a book of poems and a candle, will still be alive." Well, we'll see about that. This is the kind of self-congratulatory silliness that gives the humanities a bad name. And when Pauline Yu, president of the council, addressed herself to the big, obvious question—Just what will it take to reinvigorate the humanities?—the answer was stupefyingly predictable. What was needed was more: more money, more fundraising attention from university leaders, more support from Congress, more jobs for professors.

This answer suggests that many of those who speak for the humanities, especially within the organized scholarly disciplines (history, English, and the like), have not quite acknowledged the nature of the problem. The humanities reached

unprecedented heights of prestige and funding in the post-World War II era. But their advocates can only dream of such status today.

The thing most needful is not more money, but a willingness to think back to first principles. What are the humanities, other than disciplines with “humanistic content”? What exactly are the humanities for, other than giving pleasure to people who enjoy playing inconsequential games with words and concepts?

It is perhaps more helpful, if still somewhat abstract, to say that “the humanities” include those branches of human knowledge that concern themselves with human beings and their culture, and that do so in ways that show conversancy with the language of human values and respect for the dignity and expressive capacity of the human spirit.

But this can be stated even more directly. The distinctive task of the humanities, unlike the natural sciences and social sciences, is to grasp human things in human terms, without converting or reducing them to something else: not to physical laws, mechanical systems, biological drives, psychological disorders, social structures, and so on. The humanities attempt to understand the human condition from the inside, as it were, treating the human person as subject as well as object, agent as well as acted-upon.

Such means are not entirely dissimilar from the careful and disciplined methods of science. In fact, the humanities can benefit greatly from emulating the sciences in their careful formulation of problems and honest weighing of evidence. But the humanities are distinctive, for they begin (and end) with a willingness to ground themselves in the world as we find it and experience it, the world as it appears to us—the thoughts, emotions, imaginings, and memories that make up our picture of reality. The genius of humanistic knowledge—and it is a form of knowledge—is its continuity with the objects it helps us to know. Hence, the knowledge the humanities offer us is like no other, and cannot be replaced by scientific breakthroughs or superseded by advances in material knowledge. Science teaches us that the earth rotates on its axis while revolving around the sun. But in the domain of the humanities, the sun still also rises and sets, and still establishes, in that diurnal rhythm, one of the deepest and most universal expressive symbols of all the things that rise and fall, or live and die.

It utterly violates the spirit of literature, and robs it of its value, to reduce it to something else. Too often, there seems to be a presumption among scholars that the only interest in Dickens or Proust derives from the extent to which they can be read to confirm the abstract propositions of Marx, Freud, and the like and promote the right preordained political attitudes, or to lend support to fashionable literary theories or the identity politics du jour. Meanwhile, in my experience, the genuine, unfeigned love of literature is most faithfully repre-

sented not in the universities but among the intelligent general readers and devoted secondary school teachers scattered across the land.

Why is this so? The chief reason has to do with the peculiar effect of academia on literary and humanistic studies. Intelligent and curious general readers, who are more numerous than we sometimes imagine, and secondary teachers, who spend their lives operating on the front lines of literacy, have no stake in the publish-or-perish mentality that shapes most of the highly specialized writing that flows out of academic venues. Nor, for obvious reasons, do they have any time for works and

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authors that seem to call into question or even undermine the general value of the literary enterprise itself, as so much of the literary theory of the past 30 years, including that of Stanley Fish himself, so often did. They are trying to keep alive their own humanistic interests, and to pass those interests along to the younger generation. They do so not because literature is their business, but because it is their passion.

The chief point to make here is that the humanities do have a use, an important use—an essential use—in our lives. Not that we can’t get along without them. Certainly not in the same sense that we can’t get along without a steady supply of air, water, and nutrients to sustain organic life, and someone to make candles and books for the world’s poets. But we need the humanities in order to understand more fully what it means to be human, and to permit that knowledge to shape and nourish the way we live.

For many Americans, not just Stanley Fish, such a statement goes against the grain. After all, we like to think of ourselves as a practical people. We don’t spend our lives chasing fluffy abstractions. We don’t dwell on the past. We ask hardheaded questions, such as Where does that get you? How can you solve this problem? What’s the payoff? If you’re so smart, we demand, why aren’t you rich?

Well, there’s nothing wrong with concentrating on the “uses” of something. The difficulty comes when we operate with too narrow a definition of “use.” At some point, we have to consider the ultimate goals toward which our life’s actions are directed. What makes for a genuinely meaningful human life? Of what “use” are things that fail to promote that end? If you’re so rich, we must ask, why aren’t you wise—or happy?



If the humanities are the study of human things in human ways, then it follows that they function in culture as a kind of corrective or regulative mechanism, forcing upon our attention those features of our complex humanity that the given age may be neglecting or missing. It may be that the humanities are so hard to define because they have always defined themselves in opposition. What we are as humans is, in some respects, best defined by what we are not: not gods, not angels, not devils, not machines, not merely animals. The humanities, too, have always defined themselves in opposition, and none of the tendencies they have opposed (such as the tendency toward materialism or faith in technology) have ceased to exist, even if they are not as dominant as they once were. That is one of the many reasons why great works of the past—from Aristotle to Dante to Shakespeare to Dostoevsky—do not become obsolete, and have shown the power to endure, and to speak to us today, once we develop the ability to hear them.

But there can be little doubt that the principal challenges to humanity's humanness have always shifted over time. In our own age, the very category of "the human" itself is under attack, as philosophers decry the hierarchical distinction between humans and animals, or humans and nature. We also are far less clear about what we mean by the word "culture," and about the standards by which it is judged, including most notably the clear distinction between "high" and "low," let alone "excellence" and "mediocrity."

One of the ways that the humanities can indeed help to save us—if they can recover their nerve—is by reminding us that the ancients knew things about humankind that modernity has failed to repeal, even if it has managed to forget them. One of the most powerful witnesses to that fact was Aldous Huxley, whose *Brave New World* (1932) continues to grow in stature as our world comes increasingly to resemble the one depicted in its pages. In that world, as one character says, "everybody's happy," thanks to endless sex, endless consumer goods, endless youth, mood-altering drugs, and all-consuming entertainment. But the novel's hero, who is named the Savage, stubbornly proclaims "the right to be unhappy," and dares to believe that there might be more to life than pleasure: "I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin." In the end, the Savage is put on display as if he were a rare zoo animal.

Huxley understood that there was something nobly incorrigible in the human spirit, a restlessness and conflictedness that is built into the constitution of our humanity, an unease that somehow comes with being what we are, and that could not be stilled by a regime of mere good feeling, or willingly be sacrificed for its sake. But he also teases and taunts us with the possibility that we might be willing to give up on our peculiarly betwixt-and-between status, and give up on the riddle that

every serious thinker since the dawn of human history has tried to understand. Huxley was disturbing, but also prescient, in fearing that in the relentless search for happiness, it is entirely thinkable that human beings might endeavor to alter their very nature, tampering with the last bastion of fate: their genetic constitution. Should that happen, supreme irony of ironies, the search for human happiness could culminate in the end of the human race as we know it. We would have become something else.

This is, of course, not really so different from the self-subverting pattern of the 20th century's totalitarian ideologies, which sought to produce "happy" societies by abolishing the independence of the individual. Yet the lure of a pleasure-swaddled posthumanity may be the particular form of that temptation to which the Western liberal democracies of the 21st century are especially prone. Hence the thrust of Huxley's work, to remind us that if we take such a step in our "quest to live as gods," we will be leaving much of our humanity behind. One of those things left behind may, ironically, be happiness itself, since the very possibility of human happiness is inseparable from the struggles and sufferings and displacements experienced by our restless, complex, and incomplete human natures. Our tradition teaches that very lesson in a hundred texts and a thousand ways, for those who have been shown how to see and hear it. It is not a lesson that is readily on offer in our increasingly distracted world. It is the work of the humanities to remind us of it, and of much else that we are ever more disposed to forget. □