

The Humanities in Hard Times

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Two months ago, Patricia Cohen published an article that the *New York Times* headlined “In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth.” She led off by saying:

One idea that elite universities like Yale, sprawling public systems like Wisconsin and smaller private colleges like Lewis and Clark have shared for generations is that a traditional liberal arts education is, by definition, not intended to prepare students for a specific vocation. Rather, the critical thinking, civic and historical knowledge and ethical reasoning that the humanities develop have a different purpose: They are prerequisites for personal growth and participation in a free democracy, regardless of career choice.

But in this new era of lengthening unemployment lines and shrinking university endowments, questions about the importance of the humanities in a complex and technologically demanding world have taken on new urgency. Previous economic downturns have often led to decreased enrollment in the disciplines loosely grouped under the term “humanities -- which generally

include languages, literature, the arts, history, cultural studies, philosophy and religion. Many in the field worry that in this current crisis those areas will be hit hardest.¹

These are indeed tough times, but, despite what some see as the first signs of a national recovery, I do not know a single university administrator who is not still desperately concerned about how and when institutions of higher education will emerge from the ongoing economic crisis.

And yet, here we are at a distinguished smaller state university celebrating the inauguration of a new Humanities Center. I want to begin by acknowledging the exceptional planning led by Professor Allan Winkler and his committee – I met with them in early October of last year, and I am astonished by how quickly they have brought this Center into being. I also want to express my gratitude for the remarkable support this project has had from the very top of the University – President David Hodge, Dean Karen Schilling and Provost Jeffrey Herbst. And I particularly want to acknowledge the remarkable generosity of your distinguished alumnus, John W. Altman, whose financial support has helped so much to make the establishment of the Center possible. I was put in touch with Mr. Altman after my fall visit to Miami, and he has a remarkable appreciation for the humanities. He wrote to me last October that “Our A&S graduates, steeped in the humanities, are the real ‘outside the box’ thinkers and doers who create jobs and wealth, and are central to the growth of the world’s economies. Not to mention philanthropy.”² Bravo! Thus, in establishing a Humanities Center in 2009, Miami University is casting a rare and significant vote in favor of the humanities in hard times. Something special and significant is happening today in Oxford, Ohio.

¹ *New York Times*, 25 February 2009

² E-mail, John W. Altman to Stanley N. Katz, 25 October 2008.

But what you are doing is cutting distinctly against the grain of current feelings about the humanities. My friend Andy Delbanco, the director of the American Studies Program at Columbia University, recently published an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in which he suggested that the academic humanities have lost the trust of the public: “Those who believe in a broad liberal education for all Americans, based on respect for culture in Matthew Arnold’s sense of ‘the best which has been thought and said,’ need to respond to the public demand for some demonstrable utility in what we teach: literature, history, philosophy, the arts.” He argues that the mission of the humanities is both “curatorial,” in that it preserves what is traditional in culture and “critical,” in that it casts a cool eye on culture: “That balance between the curatorial and the critical has always been essential if humanistic education is to have power and meaning for the young. Yet in recent decades the academic humanities have been overwhelmingly ironic and iconoclastic, and thereby failed to sustain the balance – one reason . . . why we have lost respect in universities and in society at large . . .”³

Even if, as I suppose, Delbanco is reacting to the particular problems of literature as a field, there is no doubt that he is in good company in fearing for both the internal welfare of the academic humanities and their public repute. My fellow *Chronicle of Higher Education* blogger, Laurie Fendrich, has recently written that “State Legislatures and university administrators are in slash-and-burn mode. When it comes to funds for education, technology will probably get a free pass and science a few questions, but the humanities? Some very hard questions.” Unlike Delbanco, however, she concludes:

³ “A New Day for Intellectuals,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education: The Chronicle Review*, 13 February 2009

The only way to justify studying the humanities is to abandon modern utilitarian arguments.

Instead, we could just say, “Studying the humanities is a beautiful activity, done for its own sake – and we want everyone to have the chance to do it.”

Unfortunately, although I like this argument, I can already hear the relativists clamoring, “Who’s to say what’s beautiful?” Worse, I can’t see it persuading any deans or state legislators to pony up the cash necessary to keep the study of the humanities vigorous.⁴

Well, at Miami University the deans (and John Altman) have in fact ponyed up the cash. I wish I could say that they were in the vanguard of a newly energized movement to strengthen the humanities in this country, but they are not.

The recession is having a terribly negative impact upon higher education as a whole. I am not sure of the exact financial impact on this university, but I doubt that Miami has experienced a financial challenge quite this severe in its two hundred year history. My own university, a very wealthy private institution, has just acknowledged a one-third (\$4 billion) drop in the value of its endowment, and our Provost has warned the faculty that even if full prosperity should return in 2010, the endowment will not recover its 2007 value until 2020 at the earliest. Most universities are not so fortunate as to be able to rely substantially on endowment income for operating expenses, and most public universities are finding state support, along with other traditional sources of income, declining dramatically. The response, in most cases, has been to increase in tuition, which transfers part of the burden of the recession to students and their parents. There is simply not enough money to run higher education in

⁴ “The Humanities Have No Purpose,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education: The Chronicle Review*, 3 April 2009

the manner to which we have become accustomed, and it is not at all clear when we will return to normal – assuming that we can specify what “normal” means in a context in which higher education has been growing like Topsy for more than a generation.

There is going to be a new “normal,” and the question is what the role the academic humanities will play in the new system. There have been many warnings that the fields of the humanities are threatened, though few specific examples have been cited. One area of undoubted concern is that of job placement for recent humanities Ph.D.s. Several of the major fields (literature and history, to name the two largest) are reporting that fewer departments are hiring assistant professors – many previously listed job openings were withdrawn before candidates could be interviewed at the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association. This is clearly worrisome, but the larger question is whether the number of tenure track job-lines in the humanities will be permanently reduced – and especially whether humanities budget lines will be transferred to other, more “practical” fields. It is simply too soon to tell. A related question is whether there will be a permanent increase in the number of contingent humanities faculty in relation to tenure-track positions (and in contrast to other disciplines in the arts and sciences).

The number of jobs is clearly critical to the long-term health of the humanities disciplines, but there are other concerns in the face of severe budgetary pressures. One is size and composition of teaching loads. Will humanities faculty, who have struggled to reduce their loads to the same levels as those of scientists and social scientists, be forced to teach more? Will they be forced to teach fewer courses in the areas of their research interests and more, highly general courses for non-majors fulfilling general education requirements? This would in fact push humanities faculty back to where they were in many institutions a couple of generations ago, acting as service teachers for majors in other parts of the

university. A related change would be cutbacks in research funding in the humanities. Will institutions divert scarce institutional research funding to more “marketable” disciplines? If so, since there are so few sources of external support for humanities research, it may become very difficult to fund humanities research projects. Humanists could be driven in the direction of being primarily an undergraduate teaching profession, even in so-called research universities. I have myself spoken out in favor of privileging teaching, but even I would worry about too much pressure in that direction.

Perhaps the gravest threat to the health of humanities research, however, is pressure on university library and information budgets. Scholars from all disciplines are dependent upon library and information resources, but there is an important sense in which the library is the laboratory of the humanist. For one thing, humanists are overwhelmingly the predominant users of books (we are truly the People of the Book) – and it is the library book budget that has suffered most in recent years. This situation is largely the result the price increases of STM (science-technology-medicine) serials, and in digital information of all kinds. Humanists are of course also users of digital information, but their needs are neither so clear nor so focused as those of life and physical scientists. Nor are humanists ordinarily well-organized to advocate for their fair share of library acquisitions budgets. As we move toward the bookless library (though I hope we never get there)⁵, humanists are likely to be severely disadvantaged in the competition for resources. I think it is also likely that what appear to be across-the-board cuts in university budgets will fall disproportionately on some of the newer technological approaches of the humanities, since the humanist ordinarily depends upon internal resources rather than external grants to support the hardware and software she needs for both teaching and research. Finally, I also expect universities to cut back on support for their humanities centers, those crucial organizations that have

⁵ Johana Drucker, “Blind Spots: Humanists Must Plan Their Digital Future,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education: The Chronicle Review*, 3April 2009.

only emerged in the last thirty or forty years in this country. That, of course, is one of the things that makes our celebration today all the more noteworthy.

Perhaps none of these fears will be realized. Perhaps we humanists need not worry about justifying what we do to the general public, or to our faculty colleagues, administrators and governing boards. But the prudent humanist ought to worry, and he ought to be prepared. One of my graduate school teachers, when asked by an undergraduate why he studied history, responded “why do you play baseball?” That’s clever but not good enough. What are the usual justifications for what we do? Andy Delbanco, in the essay I mentioned earlier, suggests three. The first is that “the nation needs liberally educated people if it is to compete in the global economy.” The second is that “if citizens are to participate responsibly in a democratic society, they require some knowledge of history and a capacity for critical thinking.” The third justification is that liberal education, education “that includes an engagement that includes the humanities -- deepens and enriches individual experience.” This last of course runs the risk of being no more than Laurie Fendrich’s appeal to “beautiful activity,” but it is what many of us, *au fond*, believe.

Philip Lewis, the vice president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, responded to Delbanco’s essay in a letter to the *Chronicle’s* editor by saying that there is actually a fourth “commonplace:” “Liberal education aims for a historical, comprehensive, and integrative understanding of the world – a capacity for synthesis—that our leaders must have in order to reckon with the huge mass of problems faced by humanity.” Lewis concludes that Delbanco is wrong to dismiss the “inutility” of the humanities: “For a liberal education anchored in common socio-moral values and critical thought processes can also serve the pursuit of a higher ground on which the life of the mind and imagination, the appreciation of

consummate beauty, and the reach for magnanimity and human solidarity become ends in themselves.”⁶

I think there is also a fifth justification, which is that the humanities are, in some literal sense, useful. I heard a wonderful example of this phenomenon offered by my colleague Peter Brooks, an eminent literary scholar, in a panel I organized last week at the Woodrow Wilson School on “Guns in America.” Peter’s assignment was to discuss the recent opinion of the United States Supreme Court (*D.C. v. Heller*) in which the Court acknowledged for the first time something like an individual constitutional right to bear arms. The text in question in *Heller* was, of course, the Second Amendment. Recent controversy about the right to bear arms has turned on the grammar of the Amendment. How are we to understand the first clause in relation to the entire Amendment? The text reads: “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The question is whether “the right of the people to keep and bear arms” sets the context for the “well-regulated Militia” clause, or whether the first clause is a throw-away, reducing the meaning of the Amendment to “the right of the people”? Brooks pointed us to an *amicus curiae* brief submitted in *Heller* by three professors of English and Linguistics in support of the idea that the Amendment is focused on militias, not individuals. I won’t try to rehearse the whole of their subtle argument, but in essence it is that the first clause functions as an ablative absolute, a construction that would have been clearly apparent to the Framers of the Amendment, schooled as they were in Latin grammar. Anyone here remember the ablative absolute? James Madison did, and recalling our Latin should help us to understand what he meant to do in constructing the Amendment as he did. The linguistics professors conclude:

⁶ Philip E. Lewis, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education: The Chronicle Review*, 3 April 2009.

Most American readers in the federal period, including those without formal grammar study, would have had no trouble understanding that the Second Amendment’s absolute construction functioned to make the Amendment effectively read: because a well regulated Militia is necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed.⁷

I call this a very useful application of humanistic knowledge. There are many others.

But I agree with those who caution that even if George Santayana did remind us of the “utility of useless knowledge,” in the early twenty-first century it is probably dangerous to rest the case for the humanities on practicality. Leon Wieseltier of *The New Republic* responded to Patricia Cohen’s *Times* article (with which I began this talk) by admitting that the humanities are impractical. The humanities:

. . . will not change the world. They will change only the experience, and the understanding, and the evaluation, of the world. Since interpretation is the distinctively human activity, instruction in the traditions of interpretation should hardly be controversial – except in a society that mistakes practice for a philosophy.

Wieseltier goes on to note that “the crisis in which we find ourselves was the work of practical men,” which leads him to the thought that “in tough times, of all times, the worth of the humanities needs no

⁷ *Amicus* brief for Professors of Linguistics and English Dennis E. Baron, Richard W. Biley and Jeffrey P. Kaplan in Support of Petitioners, *District of Columbia v. Heller* (No. 07-290), p.14.

justifying. The reason is that it will take many kinds of sustenance to help people through these troubles.”

We are in need of fiscal policy *and* spiritual policy. And spiritually speaking, literature is a bailout, and so is art, and philosophy, and the rest. These are assets in which we may all hold majority ownership, assets of which we cannot be stripped, except by ourselves. . . . [W]hat ails the humanities is not as egregious as the assault on them. Regression analysis will not get us through the long night.

“To deny the fortifying power of the humanities in dark days,” he concludes, “is indecent.”⁸ And so it is.

The blame game is not one humanists ought to play in a time of troubles, even though it is true enough that it was not literature or philosophy’s fault that our economy has been undermined by toxic assets. My own sense is that all of the broad justifications that have recently been given for the support of the academic humanities are true enough: they are crucial to liberal education, essential to good citizenship, good in themselves and, yes, useful in their way. But, underlying all of these rationales, I think we need the humanities because they are among the most important ways of knowing ourselves and the world. We cannot live good lives without physics, nor can we live good lives without literature and history. Contemporary humanity exists because it thinks. And it thinks broadly, diversely and critically. All learning in this sense is a condition precedent for humanity, and the glory of the modern university is that it provides institutional support for the constant articulation and proliferation of all forms of knowledge. We need the humanities because they are an essential component of that process.

⁸ Leon Wieseltier, *Washington Diarist: The Tolstoy Bailout*, *The New Republic*, 18 March 2009. [/48.

If I am correct, then, it is essential for the university to fortify its commitment to the humanities. Far from cutting back on a less important component of its vast intellectual *repertoire*, we must pay special attention to the humanities in hard times. And that is why I was so pleased to be asked to come to Oxford to inaugurate your Humanities Center, for such centers have proved to be one of the most effective mechanisms for supporting the academic humanities. Why? The essential reason is that the humanities center creates a new space for campus-based humanists. It is a space for carrying on a broad range of activities which the disciplines themselves seldom sustain. It is a neutral space, not owned by any one of the disciplines – and thus an opportunity for non-disciplinary teaching and research. It is a space for collaboration across fields – potentially across all the disciplines in the university. It is a space for innovation and experimentation that may be hard to support in more traditional university structures – in technology, for instance, in a time when the digital humanities are beginning to come of age. It is a space for advocacy for the humanities, both within and outside the university. It is a space for outreach to the larger university and to the community from which the university draws life. It is also, not irrelevantly, a space for fundraising that is so frequently difficult for humanists to undertake.

There are a great many opportunities for your Center. Many fine models for realizing the potential of humanities centers exist across this country and abroad. The challenge to Director Winkler and his colleagues is to determine the functions appropriate for Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. What can be done here, with the resources and opportunities available to you, to make the humanities an even more important part of the life of this university and this community? These are surely hard times for both the university and your community, but the establishment of the Humanities Center represents a statement by Miami that it is looking ahead to a better future – and a future in which the humanities

can play a central role. Miami is setting itself apart from most other universities by acting so boldly at this moment in American history. I therefore extend my congratulations and very best wishes to all of you for this great adventure.