



The Burden of the Humanities

What use are the humanities? Even some scholars no longer seem sure. But at a time when bioengineering throws into question what it means to be human, the answer should be obvious.

BY WILFRED M. McCLAY



Landscape (1994), by Mark Tansey

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.

Enter the eminent literary scholar Stanley Fish, author of a regular blog for *The New York Times*, who addressed the subject with a kooky piece entitled “Will the Humanities Save Us?” (Jan. 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.

He took as his starting point Anthony Kronman’s pas-

sionate and high-minded book *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (2007), in which Kronman argues that higher education has lost its soul, and can only recover it by re-emphasizing the building of character through the study of great literary and philosophical texts. Fish was having none of such “pretty ideas.” There is “no evidence,” he sniffed, that such study has the effect of “ennobling” us or spurring us on to noble actions. If it did, then the finest people on earth would be humanities professors, a contention for which the evidence is, alas, mostly on the other side.

Teachers of literature and philosophy possess specialized knowledge, Fish asserted, but they do not have a ministry. 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. That one of the humanities’ most famous, influential, and well-paid elder statesmen would damn his own livelihood with such faint praise seems in itself a perfect indicator of where we now find ourselves.



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

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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 preceptor, and the humanities as task—need to be

combine to make all the fearsome transgressions of the past into the iron cages of the future, and leave the human image permanently altered.

The mere fact that there are so many people whose livelihood depends on the humanities, and that the humanities have a certain lingering cultural capital associated with them, and a resultant snob appeal, does not mean that they are necessarily capable of exercising any real cultural authority. This is where the second sense of burden comes in—the humanities as reclamation task. The humanities cannot be saved by massive increases in funding. But they can be

saved by men and women who believe in them.



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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. Its urgency is only increasing as we move closer to the technologies of a posthuman future, a strange, half-lit frontier in which bioengineering and pharmacology may

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 of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative 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 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 airy-fairy, 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, in the immortal words of the great American labor leader Samuel Gompers, *more*: more money, more fundraising attention from university leaders, more support from Congress, more jobs for professors.

The fixation on a Gompers agenda 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. Now the humanities have become the Ottoman Empire of the academy, a sprawling, incoherent, and steadily declining congeries of disparate communities, each formed around one or another credal principle of ideology and identity, and each with its own complement of local sultans, khedives, and potentates.

And the empire steadily erodes, as colleges and universities eliminate such core humanities departments as classics (or, at the University of Southern California, German), and enrollment figures for humanities courses continue to fall or stagnate. Even at Anthony Kronman's Yale College, which has an unusually strong commitment to the humanities and many stellar humanities departments, the percentage of undergraduates majoring in humanities fields has fallen sharply since 1986, from half of all majors to just over a third.

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 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 commensurability, even consanguinity, 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

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

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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 or Conrad derives from the extent to which they can be read to confirm the abstract propositions of Marx, Freud, Fanon, and the like—or Smith and Hayek and Rand, for that matter—and promote the right preordained political attitudes, or lend support to the identity politics du jour. Strange, that an era so pleased with its superficially freewheeling and antinomian qualities is actually so distrustful of the literary imagination, so intent upon making its productions conform to predetermined criteria. Meanwhile, the genuine, unfeigned love of literature is most faithfully represented not in the universities but among the intelligent general readers and devoted secondary-school teachers scattered across the land.



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

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?

And that brings me to a characteristically humanistic way to relate a truth: by telling a story. The tale begins with a tourist on holiday, wandering through the back alleys of San Francisco's Chinatown, where he comes upon a little antique shop, filled with curious pieces of bric-a-brac and art objects. What especially catches his eye is a beautifully wrought, life-size bronze statue of a rat. He asks the elderly shopkeeper the price. "The rat costs \$12," says the shopkeeper, "and it will be \$1,000 more for the story behind it." "Well, you can keep your story, old man," responds the tourist, "But I'll take the statue."

The tourist leaves the store with the statue under his arm. As he crosses the street, he is surprised to see two rats emerge from a storm drain and fall into step behind him. He looks nervously over his shoulder and starts to walk faster. Soon more rats appear and begin

to follow him. In a few minutes vermin are coming out of every sewer, basement, and vacant lot, forming themselves into swarms and packs and massing in step behind him. People on the street point and shout as the rodents force him into a trot, then a dead run. The rats, now squeaking and squealing grotesquely, stay right behind him.

By the time he reaches the water's edge, the line of rats trailing him extends back for 12 city blocks. It's a terrifying spectacle. In desperation, the tourist leaps as high as he can onto a lamppost and grasps it with one arm while, with the other, he flings the statue as far as he can into the waters of San Francisco Bay. To his amazement, the hordes of rats race right by him and follow the statue, surging over the breakwater and leaping into the bay . . . then promptly drowning.

Immediately, the tourist hurries back to the antique shop. When he appears at the door, the shopkeeper smiles knowingly and says, "Ah, yes, sir. So now you've seen what the statue can do, and you've come back to find out the story?" "No, no, no," replies the tourist excitedly. "I don't care about that. But can you sell me a bronze statue of a lawyer?"

The story is good for a laugh, but it also illustrates a point. The tourist in this story is interested only in the immediate uses of things. He couldn't care less about "knowing the story," the context in which the statue came to be, and which would explain the source of its special powers. This lack of curiosity is part of the joke. But doesn't the punch line assume that we agree with him? If the statue can have such amazing effects, who cares how it works? A picture may be worth a thousand words, but no story is worth a thousand bucks.

This, I'm afraid, is the characteristic American attitude toward the past. "You can keep your story, old man; I'll take the statue." But our tourist friend also makes a serious error of judgment, assuming that all bronze statues from this shop will have the same effect. How can he possibly know that, until he has heard "the story?" His lack of interest in "the story" is not only crude, it is foolish. Hasn't he learned that you get what you pay for?

Yet this attitude, or something like it, is all too common in our culture. One is particularly aware of the problem if one is a teacher of American history, at a

time when the state of general knowledge of our past is abysmally low and sinking. It is profoundly important for us to resist this tendency. For you can't really appreciate the statuary of our country—our political and social and economic institutions—or know the value of American liberty and prosperity, or intelligently assess America's virtues and vices against the standard of human history and human possibility, unless you pay the price of learning the stories.



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. That becomes clearer if we look back at the role played by the humanities (or by cultural activities that we can legitimately call by that name) in earlier times.

Some notion of the humanities first began to arise out of the Greek conception of *paideia*, a course of general education dating from the mid-fifth century BC that was designed to prepare young men for active citizenship. It was further developed in the Roman notion of *humanitas*, set forth in Cicero's *De Oratore* (55 BC). Early Church Fathers, notably St. Augustine, would adapt the Greek and Roman ideas to a program of Christian education, built around the study of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. For classical and early Christian thinkers alike, these disciplines were thought to have value because they aided human beings in the fulfillment of their highest human nature, a rational nature that was assumed to be elevated above and distinct from that of mere animals.

By the Renaissance, though, the point of reference had changed somewhat. The *studia humanitatis*, as the "humanists" of 15th-century Italy called them, shifted emphasis toward subjects that were human, not as opposed to animal, but as opposed to *divine*. Hence, their object was notably more secular than religious in character, though partaking of both attributes. They were grounded in a recommitment to classical forms of learning that had been de-emphasized (though never entirely

lost) during the Middle Ages. Such logic carried the day, perhaps even carried it too well—for the philosophes of the 18th-century Enlightenment later rejected the *studia humanitatis* precisely because of their heavy emphasis on Latin and Greek studies. Inspired by the success of burgeoning modern science and bored by the pedantic study of ancient classical texts, Denis Diderot and the other French Encyclopedists thought it long past time to move on to new things.

By the 19th century, the proper domain of the humanities had undergone another transformation. They now began to take their identity, not so much from the human distance from the realm of the divine, but instead from the human distance from nature—specifically from nature as understood by the increasingly influential physical sciences. These ripening disciplines, such as mathematical physics, tended to picture the world and its phenomena

general harmonious expansion of those gifts of thought and feeling which make the peculiar dignity, wealth, and happiness of human nature.” Culture was, for him, the “study of perfection,” a force for balance and integration whose function was particularly vital to a civilization that was sadly becoming “mechanical and external,” and tending constantly to become more so. “Faith in machinery,” he insisted, was “our besetting danger.”



We live in a different age, far less enamored of the machine, if far more dependent upon it. Which raises, in a different way, the question of the humanities’ past and future. Do any of these three previous understandings of the humanities—the human as opposed to the animal, the divine, or the rational-

mechanical—have any meaning in our times? All three still do, and will continue to. Each has derived its power from its willingness to assert, and insist upon, some crucial aspect of what it means to be human, some aspect that the conditions of the day

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“objectively” and mechanistically, without reference to human subjectivity and meaning. It was now the distinctive role of the humanities to counter this tendency, to picture the world differently from the sciences, and thereby to preserve the heart and spirit and affective properties of the human being in what seemed increasingly to be a soulless and materialistic age, dominated by large machines and larger social and economic mechanisms.

The humanities’ new picture took account of some of the same responses to industrialism and utilitarianism that gave rise to the Romantic movement in literature and art. But, as the writings of the poet and critic Matthew Arnold show with special force, the body of knowledge we call the humanities—or, to use his preferred term, “culture”—was increasingly looked to as a substitute for religion in the formation, education, and refinement of humanity’s sentiments and moral sensibilities.

The aims of religion and culture coincided, Arnold claimed, since both concerned themselves with “the

may have threatened to submerge. 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 (and ordinarily not rats). The humanities, too, have always defined themselves in opposition, and none of the tendencies they have opposed 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. Indeed, one of the repeated themes of Western intellectual history is the revival of the present by the recovery of the past, a principle most brilliantly exemplified by the Italian Renaissance’s self-conscious appropriation of classical ideals, but also illustrated in our own time by the sustained interest in the recovery of classical philosophy as the platform for a penetrating critique of modernity.

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, and postmodernists of various stripes proclaim the disappearance of the human "subject." 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." Matthew Arnold felt reasonably confident that we could agree upon what constituted "the best" examples of humanistic expression. But we are not so certain that such a category even makes sense anymore.

Still, if the past is any guide, what we call "the humanities" will survive and thrive, however we choose to define them. Indeed, it seems likely that they will experience yet another transformation in the years to come—one that will be, as all the transformations of previous eras have been, an assertion, or reassertion, of some essential element in our humanity that is being neglected or debased or misunderstood. Just what form it will take is impossible to say with any certainty. But I think it possible that the transformation may already be taking its bearings from the problems and prospects now opening before us in the realms of biotechnology and medicine. These developments—human cloning, genetic engineering, artificial wombs, species melding, body-parts manufacture, bionic and pharmacological enhancements, and many others—are not necessarily favorable to our human flourishing; nor are they necessarily threats to it. But they call into question precisely the inherent limitations that have always figured into what it means to be human, and throw open the windows of possibility, in ways both terrifying and exciting.

One of the ways that the humanities can indeed 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: the Nietzschean "Last Man."

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 would culminate in the end of the human race as we know it. We would have become something else. The subject, man, would have been devoured by its object.

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. ■