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Misunderstanding the Humanities



Mark Shaver for The Chronicle Review

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Reflect on a paradox in the current discussion about the humanities. The public often seems to have contempt for the humanities as a domain at once useless and often abstruse, if not positively arcane. Curiously, though, that is matched by large expectations about what we should be doing. The confusion starts with

the meanings we assign to the term "the humanities."

The American public often understands "the humanities" to mean an enterprise dedicated to the teaching of human values. They are surely the place for exploring values. Yet the expectation that we should teach them directly, in an unmediated way, misleads the public and puts us under suspicion of neglecting our task. We need to dispel the notion that we are somehow engaged in moral education, that we are teaching humanity. That means affirming a Mephistopheles principle: to be naysayers to any easy answer to questions about the good life. Avoiding answers, we ask questions, using texts. We teach our students the discipline of listening to other voices.

Recently, a reviewer of a book I edited with Hilary Jewett, *The Humanities and Public Life*, wrote in *The Chronicle Review*: "Brooks is most adamant in arguing that reading transforms people ethically." But I argued the opposite: I noted that history is replete with examples that suggest one can read *Madame Bovary* or listen to *The Marriage of Figaro* in full enjoyment—and then go out and exterminate people.

Studying the humanities may—or may not—make us more humane. Though we surely want to promote the reading of good books, we should beware of assuming that doing so has beneficial results: Those consequences are not inherent in the books. "The great books," as we call them, from *Job* and *Oedipus the King* to *Moby-Dick* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, have often given pride of place to dissent from conventional virtue and the pretty picture of human life. When Lionel Trilling, responding to the student protests of the 1960s, called them "modernism in the streets," he was suggesting that literature (and other arts) have often stood in hostile relation to cultural consensus, and have expressed their opposition in disruptive ways.

My thinking on the subject was recently prompted by a conference convened by New York University in Florence, the crucible of European humanism. The humanities as we know them largely descend from Renaissance humanism's concern to restore ancient texts and to learn how to read them. It was a philological enterprise, with enormous philosophical consequences, including liberating us to think about human nature in secular terms. The enterprise of the *litterae humaniores* deals with human reflections on the human condition. In the line variously paraphrased from Terence, the humanist claims that nothing human is alien. But that "human" has the capacity for the worst as well as the best. Terence's line comes to mind in Dostoevsky's exploration of the "damned questions"—the intractable issue of evil, for instance—in his novels.

If the humanities contribute to our understanding of human rights, as is often claimed, for example, it's not in any simple or straightforward way. Let me put this in shorthand. I would consider Rousseau a fountainhead of any human-rights discourse (not an original position, by any means). But two of the most attentive readers of Rousseau are, on the one hand, the Marquis de Sade, who in his *Philosophy in the Bedroom* provides a kind of faithful—but totally deviant—text based on Rousseau's treatise on education, the *émile*; and Robespierre, who tried to establish a Rousseauian regime of virtue through the imposition of the Terror.

Both Sade and Robespierre misread Rousseau, though in ways that Rousseau's texts at times encourage. My understanding and teaching of the humanities would want to make a place for Sade and even Robespierre (or at least his more literary sidekick, Saint-Just) as part of a negative dialectics that anyone needs to go through in order to understand Rousseau, or indeed in order to be fully human. That need is captured for me in the words of Conrad's character Stein, the German merchant in *Lord Jim* who offers Marlow, the narrator, advice: "In the destructive element immerse." For Stein that destructive element is explicitly like the sea:

A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns—nicht wahr? ... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.

I want to take Stein's words as a *reading* lesson. Far from teaching virtue, we in the humanities advocate immersion in the destructive element.

The teacher of literature (and this can be true as well for the teacher of philosophy or art history or music) is engaged in a strange experience of negativity: of not speaking quite in his or her own voice. In the classroom, we let other voices, for instance from the past, speak through us. Certainly that was the enterprise of the original humanists, who practiced "imitations" of antique sources in vernacular languages. Most often, present with us in the classroom is an open book—or some other artifact of human creation—and it is that book or artifact that we would coax into speech. As interpreters, we are mouthpieces of others—ventriloquists of their ideas and words.

This experience of otherness—perhaps akin to what Keats called "negative capability," the capacity of the poet to inhabit other personalities and perspectives—is characteristic of reading and interpretation in the humanities, and it leads to a certain ethics: a self-dispossession in favor of the text, another voice in the room. The object of interpretation shares the stage with the interpreter. At its best, such an attitude allows other voices to develop their full force, full articulation, without censoring it—in a kind of dualism of feeling.

What I am proposing in place of the notion that the humanities make you humane is something more technical and more austere. Reading—the reading we have learned over the years to call "close," or sometimes "slow"—can in itself be an ethical experience. It is one that we pursue, ideally, with others, in a dialogic process in which those involved come to respect the practice of interpretation and, while not necessarily agreeing on any single construal, find the process itself disciplined, illuminating, and correct. An ethics of reading in this sense is very much the discipline of a *practice*—not a nugget of content or a lesson taken from what is read, but what we discover in the reading process itself, in the effort to come to terms with what a text means.

Anyone who teaches literature (again, the same can be said of teaching the visual arts or music or philosophy) knows that the discipline involved in reading and interpretation is real, and that "getting it right," defending a reading, particularly in a group discussion, comes to matter very much to all involved: to be part of an enterprise that creates and reinforces an ethics.

Northrop Frye makes the claim, "Everyone who has seriously studied literature knows that the mental process involved is as coherent and progressive as the study of science." I don't entirely agree, but I think I know what he means. When you engage publicly in acts of interpretation, in dialogue with others who contest you and whom you need to persuade, you are engaged in something that has principles and procedures. At its best, its most persuasive, this practice should offer a convincing critique of acts of interpretation that are arbitrary and ungrounded, based on the authoritarian imposition of meanings rather than their careful construal.

My thinking about "an ethics of reading" was triggered by the release of the "torture memos," largely composed in 2002 to provide legal cover to those who wanted to use (or already had used) extreme physical and psychological abuse in the interrogation of prisoners in the misbegotten "war on terror" (the very term represented a self-blinding). The kind of instrumental interpretation that goes on in the law and at the level of the U.S. Supreme Court, which in the past decade has ratcheted up extraordinarily radical rereadings of constitutional texts, demonstrates that interpretation has an impact. Those of us in the humanities who make a professional practice of interpretation have something to teach other professions.

President Obama has proposed that universities each be given a grade, tied in part to their cost-effectiveness in furthering the careers of their graduates. And that is not merely an American phenomenon in the age of neoliberalism's focus on bottom-line thinking: British

scholars have been under pressure to demonstrate their "impact on knowledge" for many years now, and in countries like France the humanities have been starved in order to promote more useful disciplines.

Responding to the demands that the university demonstrate its value—for instance, in the "outcomes" and "value-added" testing now widely proposed in the United States to assess students' acquisition of knowledge and skills—creates a particular dilemma for the humanities. To say we are useless won't do, nor do we believe that.

To submit to the measures of usefulness proposed in most of the schemes of evaluation, on the other hand, would betray what we do, which is not directly instrumental. It's important that the humanities affirm what they can do, the kinds of ethics they promote in their practices of interpretation, while making it clear that they are not directly in the virtue business. Clarity about what we are would be a good step in learning how to speak for ourselves in public discourse.

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