



Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Winter 2014

What Humanists Do

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Introduction

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It is a minor embarrassment that the words *humanist* and *humanism* are regularly found on the same page of big dictionaries. I should say at once, therefore, that the contributors to this issue of *Dædalus* are humanists because they work on the humanities and teach them, often under conditions that seem unpropitious, in colleges and universities. What they are otherwise, in their personal and social lives, is none of my business. Humanism raises a different issue. The Oxford English Dictionary gives five meanings of it, in notably awkward phrasing. The predominant one refers to a tenet, an axiom, or a prejudice – depending on one’s viewpoint – in the history of philosophy:

A pragmatic system of thought introduced by F. C. S. Schiller and William James which emphasizes that man can only comprehend and investigate what is with the resources of the human mind, and discounts abstract theorizing; so, more generally, implying that technological advance must be guided by awareness of widely understood human needs.

In some contexts, humanism has taken on a more contentious character, often being opposed to scholasticism, or to religion, especially to Christianity. When T. S. Eliot was editor of *The Criterion*, he was sufficiently disturbed by humanism in this character that he solicited several essays and published them in the hope of disposing of it as a mere substitute for religion: as he said, “Humanism is either an alternative to religion, or is ancillary to it.

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Introduction ... You cannot make humanism itself into a religion.”¹ T. E. Hulme also wrote about humanism, even more severely. Happily, this is not our problem.

The O.E.D. also distinguishes five meanings of the word *humanist*. Only the second and third of these recognize, with a certain extension, the concerns of the essays collected here:

2. One devoted to or versed in the literary studies called “the humanities”: a classical scholar; esp. a Latinist, a professor or teacher of Latin. *arch.* (Sometimes by early writers opposed to “divine.”)
3. (In literary history). One of the scholars who, at the Revival of Learning in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, devoted themselves to the study of the language, literature, and antiquities of Rome, and afterwards of Greece; hence, applied to later disciples of the same culture.

As an instance of the second, the O.E.D. gives Samuel Johnson’s “*Humanist*, a philologist; a grammarian: a term used in the schools of Scotland.” As an instance of the third, it gives Matthew Arnold’s “Milton was born a humanist, but the Puritan temper mastered him.” I cite, as a closer-to-home example of the third, a passage in *The Conciliarist Tradition* in which our contributor Francis Oakley, referring to the Council of Constance, notes that “it numbered among its participants humanists of the caliber of Pier Paolo Vergerio, Leonardo Bruni, and Poggio Bracciolini, and, by affording an occasion for learned colleagues from Italy and Germany to meet, it played, along with its successor council at Basel, a role of some significance in the diffusion of humanist ideas.”² Those ideas had mainly to do with the recourse to ancient Latin and Greek writers (especially Cicero), Roman and Canon Law, Italian jurisprudence, and history – none

of these in a disinterested spirit, but polemically in relation to civil and ecclesiastical power. It is an easy extension of the O.E.D.’s second and third meanings to say that humanists are engaged in the study not alone of Greek and Latin civilization but of any and every practice of human culture (except that some of these practices are demonstrably the province of scientists, those adepts of the experimental method, techniques of replication, verification, and other procedures). *The Heart of the Matter*, a recent study of the humanities and social sciences published by the American Academy, distinguished “the STEM disciplines” – science, technology, engineering, and mathematics – from the humanities, “including the study of languages, literature, history, film, civics, philosophy, religion, and the arts.” A few pages later the list of humanities was changed: “the study of languages, literature, history, jurisprudence, philosophy, comparative religion, ethics, and the arts.” The social sciences were deemed to include “anthropology, economics, political science and government, sociology, and psychology.”³ It would be easy to conclude from *The Heart of the Matter* that the humanities are indistinguishable from the social sciences and that they have their best chance of survival by being content with membership in that extended family.

It is not necessary to be more specific, except for two considerations. One of them has been expressed by Northrop Frye:

The preoccupation of the humanities with the past is sometimes made a reproach against them by those who forget that we face the past: it may be shadowy, but it is all that is there. Plato draws a gloomy picture of man staring at the flickering shapes made on the wall of the objective world by a fire behind us like the sun. But the analogy breaks down when the shadows are those

of the past, for the only light we can see them by is the Promethean fire within us. The substance of these shadows can only be in ourselves, and the goal of historical criticism, as our metaphors about it often indicate, is a kind of self-resurrection, the vision of a valley of dry bones that takes on the flesh and blood of our own vision.⁴

The second consideration arises from one of Jacques Derrida's lectures, turned not toward the past but toward a possible future of the humanities, attested by his vision and by that alone. The lecture, an extension of an earlier one, "Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties," began straightforwardly as a demand not only for what is conventionally called academic freedom but for "an *unconditional* freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly all that is required by research, knowledge, and thought concerning the *truth*."⁵ Yet there are always conditions: "What is Truth?" said jesting Pilate. But as Derrida's lecture went on and he mentioned subjects normally agreed to belong to the humanities – philosophy and politics, especially – he invoked those not as they are regularly taught but as they might be professed in a possible future of Derrida's bold devising. The teachers, it occurs to me to say, would not love the subjects as they already are but as they would be transformed if practiced under the deconstructive signs of "perhaps," "if," and "as if." They would be deliberately put out of joint, as in a time categorically out of joint. We are not to think that this vision is fraternal with Vaihinger's *Philosophy of the 'As If'*; on the contrary, Derrida distances himself from Vaihinger in a footnote to the lecture as printed. And just when I thought that he would approve of Austin's sociable distinction between constative and performative statements, Derrida insisted on exceeding it:

Well, it is once again in the Humanities that one would have to make arrive, make happen the thinking of this other mode of the "if," this more than difficult, impossible thing, the exceeding of the performative and of the constative/performative opposition. By thinking, *in* the Humanities, this limit of mastery and of performative conventionality, this limit of performative authority, what is one doing? One is acceding to the place where the always necessary context of the performative operation (a context that is, like every convention, an institutional context) can no longer be saturated, delimited, fully determined.⁶

This passage is not the only one in which Derrida, as I labor to construe his sentences, has appeared to pyrrhonize, but it is not necessary for me to claim anything more than that he is encompassing the apparent security of the humanities, as ordinarily practiced, in a future condition with radical doubt as their principle.

Derrida refers to the humanities, and keeps on doing so, as if they might be established at worst for the time being. In another lecture, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils," he implies that the humanities cannot any longer find stability in their being distinguished from the sciences. Speaking of applied science, or oriented science as he prefers to call it – science directed toward use outside the laboratory or university – he asks what is proposed "in opposition to this concept of oriented research." The answer, not surprisingly, is "basic, 'fundamental' research, disinterested research with aims that would not be pledged in advance to some utilitarian purpose." But lest we take comfort from this answer, he continues:

Once upon a time it was possible to believe that pure mathematics, theoretical physics, philosophy (and within philosophy, especially metaphysics and ontology) were

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basic disciplines shielded from power, inaccessible to programming by the pressures of the State or, under cover of the State, by civil society or capital interests. The sole concern of such basic research would be knowledge, truth, the disinterested exercise of reason, under the sole authority of the principle of reason. And yet we know better than ever before what must have been true for all time, that this opposition between the basic and the end-oriented is of real but limited relevance. It is difficult to maintain this opposition with thoroughgoing conceptual as well as practical rigor, especially in the modern fields of the formal sciences, theoretical physics, astrophysics (consider the remarkable example of the science of astronomy, which is becoming useful after having been for so long the paradigm of disinterested contemplation), chemistry, molecular biology, and so forth. Within each of these fields – and they are more interrelated than ever – the so-called basic philosophical questions no longer simply take the form of abstract, sometimes epistemological questions, raised after the fact; they arise at the very heart of scientific research in the widest variety of ways.

This state of affairs is not new, Derrida concedes, “but never before has basic scientific research been so deeply committed to aims that are at the same time military aims.”

This is all too obvious in such areas as physics, biology, medicine, biotechnology, bioprogramming, data processing and telecommunications. We have only to mention telecommunications and data processing to assess the extent of the phenomenon: the “orientation” of research is limitless, everything in these areas proceeds “in view” of technical and instrumental security. At the service of war, of national and international security, research programs have to encompass the entire field of infor-

mation, the stockpiling of knowledge, the workings and thus also the essence of language and of all semiotic systems, translation, coding and decoding, the play of presence and absence, hermeneutics, semantics, structural and generative linguistics, pragmatics, rhetoric.

Listing these disciplines in a haphazard way on purpose, Derrida then says of literature, poetry, the arts and fiction in general that “the theory that has these disciplines as its object may be just as useful in ideological warfare as it is in experimentation with variables in all-too-familiar perversions of the referential function.” From now on, he maintains, “a military budget can invest in anything at all, in view of deferred profits: ‘basic’ scientific theory, the humanities, literary theory and philosophy.” Furthermore, “when certain random consequences of research are taken into account, it is always possible to have in view some eventual benefit that may ensue from an apparently useless research project (in philosophy or the humanities, for example).”⁷

One of the morals to be drawn from Derrida’s sad sentences is that whatever comfort we have derived from the common separation of the humanities from the sciences is specious: the privilege of technology in the service of useful ends is likely to wipe out that distinction, too. If we thought that the humanities were a safe haven, a quiet backwater in which we could live our peaceful lives, we were wrong. It is no wonder that Derrida could appeal only to the university that is to come, like the democracy that is to come, both of them visionary entities. Meanwhile I gather that many Americans are willing to sacrifice at least some privacy for the sake of what they are assured is their domestic security, and to look with equanimity on the secret mining of data in what is declared to be a good cause.

But we should not take lightly what Derrida is obliged to speak of in the future tense, or in a present tense already beset with dire futurity. It is impossible to think of the humanities with equanimity. My next short section is also an admonition.

On October 4, 1957, Russian scientists launched into orbit the first artificial Earth satellite, popularly called Sputnik, an object 23 inches in diameter. A month later, on November 3, they launched a larger object, Sputnik 2. Outside Russia and especially in the United States, these achievements caused mainly consternation. If Russian scientists could send such objects into orbit, they might send a nuclear bomb, next time. Worse still, on January 31, 1958, American scientists tried to emulate the Russian launching, and failed. Hannah Arendt, adding a last-minute prologue to *The Human Condition*, considered Sputnik an event “second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom.” Its bearing on political life was likely to be woeful:

If we would follow the advice, so frequently urged upon us, to adjust our cultural attitudes to the present status of scientific achievement, we would in all earnest adopt a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful. For the sciences today have been forced to adopt a “language” of mathematical symbols which, though it was originally meant only as an abbreviation for spoken statements, now contains statements that in no way can be translated back into speech.

The question of maintaining speech, or of rendering it redundant, seemed to Arendt crucial because “speech is what makes man a political being.” Hence:

The reason why it may be wise to distrust the political judgment of scientists *qua* sci-

entists is not primarily their lack of “character” – that they did not refuse to develop atomic weapons – or their naïveté – that they did not understand that once these weapons were developed they would be the last to be consulted about their use – but precisely the fact that they move in a world where speech has lost its power. And whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about.⁸

Arendt did not say, or even hint, that it was now up to humanists to maintain the Florentine power of speech. She did not say that the humanities are the prime form in which human values are described and discussed, talked about, and argued over; that the humanities are predicated upon speech. But she permitted us to think that it might be so.

The humanities are not the arts, they are (many of them) about the arts. Brahms’s Symphony No. 3 is a work of art; Susan McClary’s essay on it is a work of the humanities. Geoffrey Hill’s poem “September Song” is a work of art; his essay “Our Word is Our Bond” is a work of the humanities. Alan Rusbridger’s book on Chopin’s Ballade No. 1, op. 23 is a work of the humanities. The humanities do not lose anything by being separated from the things they are “about.” It does not matter, for present purpose, whether a work of the humanities is written or spoken, an essay, a book, a lecture, a seminar, or a conversation. Speech is implied. We argue about the values we think are in our keeping, especially when we fear that they are not. F. R. Leavis’s commentary, in *The Living Principle*, on Eliot’s *Four Quartets* presupposes an occasion of speech, agreement or disagreement with someone – it might be D. W. Harding – about the poems as Leavis reads them, his critical intelligence alert line by line. He knows that his

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Introduction commentary is secondary to the poems; it comes after them, and is indebted to them. There is no competition. But the commentary is not obsequious; it has its rights, the distinctive merit of coming after.

There are passages in Leavis's commentary in which he haggles with the poem – and as a consequence, with the poet – but these passages also presuppose the moral weight and scale of Eliot's undertaking. They offer the poems the supreme tribute of being intelligent and concerned in their presence. The French Revolution happened: it was, and still is, an event. Edmund Burke, Thomas Carlyle, François Furet, and many other sages wrote books with the intention of making sense, or more sense, about it. Those books were work of the humanities. There is such a thing – to call it crudely that – as *language*. Hobbes found it necessary to think about it before thinking about other problems in philosophy; to think about language as a means of transferring “the train of our thoughts into a train of words.”⁹ This thinking, too, was work of the humanities. In *The Sight of Death*, T. J. Clark studies two paintings by Poussin, *Landscape with a Calm* and *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. I cannot believe that those paintings have ever been looked at, thought about, written about, spoken about, more intensely than by Clark; not even by other scholars of Poussin, including Anthony Blunt, Louis Marin, and Erwin Panofsky. On the few occasions on which Clark lifts his eyes and his mind from the paintings, it is to express a hard-won principle. I quote a few passages to illustrate the seriousness with which humanists go about their business, and often the thorny business of dissenting from their former selves:

My art history has always been reactive. Its enemies have been the various ways in which visual imagining of the world has

been robbed of its true humanity, and conceived of as something less than human, non-human, brilliantly (or dully) mechanical. In the beginning that meant the argument was with certain modes of formalism, and the main effort in my writing went into making the painting fully part of a world of transactions, interests, disputes, beliefs, “politics.” But who now thinks it is not? The enemy now is not the old picture of visual imaging as pursued in a state of trance-like removal from human concerns, but the parody notion we have come to live with of its *belonging to the world*, its incorporation into it, its being “fully part” of a certain image-regime. Being “fully part” means, it turns out in practice, being at any tawdry ideology's service. And this is celebrated. It is the sign of art's coming down from its ivory tower.

This passage, woeful with repentance and irony, leads Clark to another about the relation between a humanist's mind and what it engages:

Here is why the stress has to fall, it seems to me, on the specificity of picturing, and on that specificity's being so closely bound up with the mere materiality of a given practice, and on that materiality's being so often the generator of semantic depth – of true thought, true stilling and shifting of categories. I believe the distance of visual imagery from verbal discourse is the most precious thing about it.

But verbal discourse is what the scholar of art adds to the silent materiality of the paintings. Clark values that silence because it keeps in play at least the possibility of resistance to the common garrulous culture:

It represents one possibility of resistance in a world saturated by slogans, labels, sales pitches, little marketable meaning-motifs. To see the distance narrowed day by day, and intellectuals applauding the narrowing

in the name of some wholly illusory “transition from the world of the word to that of the image” – when what we have is a deadly reconciliation of the two modes, via the utter banalization of both – this is bitter to me.

A final sentence from *The Sight of Death*:

Paintings in a sense ought to disappoint us – disappoint our wish to have them be more than they are, to be fully and endlessly discursive (propositional), to be *serious* in ways we know about.¹⁰

That last phrase might provide a motto for the humanities: to discover the different ways, including ways we have not known about, in which human practices may be serious.

Some of these ways are discovered in performance. András Schiff made some telling discoveries about Bach by playing *The Well-Tempered Clavier* without pedal. Translation is also a work of the humanities. Interpretation covers these tributes to works of art, and appreciates them while allowing them to keep their secrets.

I have been saying that most (but not all) of the humanities are about something at large, some achieved value, some irrefutable event. When T. W. Adorno wrote *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, he assumed that music was already there and that there was something true and useful he might say to change the general understanding of it. But there is also a category of the humanities that we might call *theory*, in which a mind meditates on something that does not quite exist in the objective sense I have been describing; rather, it is summoned into existence, or into a particular kind of existence, by the meditation. Call it virtual. Heidegger did not invent *being*, but he called into mindful existence or presence a special sense of it. Rawls did not invent *justice*, but he projected his own rationale of it. Similarly

Collingwood on metaphysics and on nature; Balibar on the state; Ernst Bloch on the politics of hope; Bataille (like him or not) on religion; Derrida on language. These and many more are included in what I have been calling the humanities. They correspond to a distinction between instrumental and interior disciplines in the sciences. Instrumental sciences are those that are practiced in response to external or worldly needs. Medicine: people get sick. Engineering, architecture, practical mathematics: we need roads, bridges, apartment blocks, skyscrapers, and hospitals that don't fall down, and some people think we need bombs and drones. Aeronautics: we want aeroplanes. Economics: we need at least a certain amount of government, policies, finance. Interior disciplines arise when a scientist spots a theoretical problem that has not been solved, something internal to the discipline. Such problems are likely to be discerned in logic, particular forms of mathematics and physics, and cosmology: Newton on time. In olden days, we thought these were immune to being appropriated. Derrida makes us fear that they are not.

What then do humanists do? The simplest account of their work is that it does their pupils good. Northrop Frye again:

There is no reason why a great poet should be a wise and good man, or even a tolerable human being, but there is every reason why his reader should be improved in his humanity as a result of reading him. Hence while the production of culture may be, like ritual, a half-involuntary imitation of organic rhythms or processes, the response to culture is, like myth, a revolutionary act of consciousness. The contemporary development of the technical ability to study the arts, represented by reproductions of painting, the recording of music, and mod-

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Introduction ern libraries, forms part of a cultural revolution which makes the humanities quite as pregnant with new developments as the sciences. For the revolution is not simply in technology, but in spiritual productive power.¹¹

Frye published those sentences in 1957 and delivered them in lectures a few years earlier. I am not sure that his tone is still persuasive. Nearly any passage of the *Anatomy* comes with edifying force and makes me sigh: if only it were so. If what Frye says is true, why has its truth become so endangered? As here:

The ethical purpose of a liberal education is to liberate, which can only mean to make one capable of conceiving society as free, classless, and urbane. No such society exists, which is one reason why a liberal education must be deeply concerned with works of imagination.¹²

Meanwhile, it is clear from the following essays that humanists do many different kinds of things. The duties of a professor of the humanities, especially as J. Hillis Miller describes them, are such that the normal tyranny of days, weeks, and months hardly allows for their observance. Gillian Beer's relation to *The Waves*, the reading and teaching of it, is so comprehensive that only a few novels could be awarded such attention in one scholar's lifetime. Indeed, the experiences described and negotiated in these essays point to a problem that may be more burdensome in the humanities than in the sciences. We have nothing that corresponds to a paradigm – to use the word that Thomas Kuhn ascribed to the sciences in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* – a model of research to be followed, at least for the time being and until it is dislodged by one of more interest to young Turks. Humanists haven't got a paradigm; there is no model or example that indicates what we should be doing, what we should be read-

ing or arguing about. A cynic would say that the reason you don't respect any particular model – the reason you can do whatever you like – is that it doesn't make any difference what you do: you don't cure the sick or build bridges. True. But another way of dealing with the lack of paradigms is to reflect that authority in the humanities is acutely personal: literary scholars take their bearings, should they feel the need, from the major figures, or some few of them, and from these only insofar as one finds a master irresistible. Nobody is irresistible forever. Besides, it is always possible for a strong teacher of the humanities to mind his or her own business, read the books one happens to admire, teach these books, and let the rest of the world go hang.

When I was a student of English at University College Dublin, we were obliged to read three books in our first term to gain some idea of literary and social criticism. These were Aristotle's *Poetics*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, and Newman's *The Idea of a University*. But they were not prescribed as implying an orthodoxy to be obeyed; we were only obliged to read them as set texts to be thought about. When I became an assistant lecturer at the same university, I taught whatever courses were assigned to me, but I was drawn to one figure of authority who was not assigned to me or to anyone else: T. S. Eliot. I respected Eliot's judgment that "criticism . . . must always profess an end in view, which, roughly speaking, appears to be the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste."¹³ As a teacher, I set myself to the first part of Eliot's program, under the sign of aesthetics, which I took to be a particular form of perception. A work of art, I learned from Susanne K. Langer's *Feeling and Form*, is made to be perceived. The second part of Eliot's injunction, I mostly assumed might arise from time to time, but I did not think I

was qualified to correct anyone's taste, being doubtful about my own. Eliot's reference in the same essay to "the common pursuit of true judgment" stayed in my mind as a motto, especially when Leavis later called a selection of his own essays *The Common Pursuit* in a further tribute to the master.

One passage of Eliot's prose bewildered me. In "Religion and Literature" (1935) he wrote:

It is simply not true that works of fiction, prose or verse, that is to say works depicting the actions, thoughts and words and passions of imaginary human beings, *directly* extend our knowledge of life. Direct knowledge of life is knowledge directly in relation to ourselves, it is our knowledge of *how* people behave in general, of *what* they are like in general, in so far as that part of life in which we ourselves have participated gives us material for generalization. Knowledge of life obtained through fiction is only possible by another stage of self-consciousness. That is to say, it can only be a knowledge of other people's knowledge of life, not of life itself.

That was hard. As a student and as a young teacher, I had no idea what Eliot meant by "another stage of self-consciousness." I assumed that, reading *Pride and Prejudice*, it was enough if I followed each of the characters, feeling or trying to feel what he or she felt at particular moments; but that did not seem to be what Eliot had in view. He continued:

So far as we are taken up with the happenings in any novel in the same way in which we are taken up with what happens under our eyes, we are acquiring at least as much falsehood as truth. But when we are developed enough to say: "This is the view of life of a person who was a good observer within his limits, Dickens, or Thackeray, or George Eliot, or Balzac; but he looked at it in a different way from me, because he was a dif-

ferent man; he even selected rather different things to look at, or the same things in a different order of importance, because he was a different man; so what I am looking at is the world as seen by a particular mind" – then we are in a position to gain something from reading fiction. We are learning *something* about life from these authors direct, just as we learn something from the reading of history direct; but these authors are only really helping us when we can see, and allow for, their differences from ourselves.¹⁴

This appears to recommend that instead of immersing ourselves in a novel, we should keep our distance from it, until we have developed to the stage of saying the things that Eliot says we should say, notably: "I am different from this author." I could do this only if I had something to help me keep my distance – such as my sense of form, style, narrative progression, the novel's idioms pulling against commonplace.

Over the years, I allowed Eliot's authority to be qualified to some extent by a poet and critic who did not seek to be authoritative in criticism: W. B. Yeats. Or if he was authoritative, it was in an irregular if not disheveled sense. He was learned in his fashion, but not in Eliot's fashion or even in Pound's. Later still, I was enchanted by R. P. Blackmur, mainly by a few of his phrases, which, once I came upon them, could not be shelved. For another while, Kenneth Burke was my master: we exchanged letters for years, but I am sure I disappointed him in the end.

But it was a phrase of Burke's that set me thinking of the lack of paradigm – of impersonal authority, if only for a while – in slightly more acceptable terms. There is a passage in *A Grammar of Motives* where Burke is considering inductive and deductive methods of approach to the reading of, say, a poem. The critic does not start from scratch, but

Introduction “has a more or less systematically organized set of terms by which to distinguish and characterize the elements of the poem he would observe.” One’s observations will not be purely “inductive,” even though “they derive important modifications from the observing of the given poem.”

They will also in part (and in particular as to their grammar, or form) be deduced or derived from the nature of the language or terminology which the critic employs. Such languages are developed prior to the individual observation (though one may adopt the well-known philosophic subterfuge: “Let us begin simply by considering this object in front of us, just as it is.”). . . . [A] given vocabulary coaches us to look for certain kinds of things rather than others.

Ordinarily, as Burke concedes, “we see somewhat beyond the limits of our favorite terms – but the bulk of our critical perceptions are but particular applications of these terms.”

The terms are like “principles,” and the particular observations are like the judicial casuistry involved in the application of principles to cases that are always in some respects unique.¹⁵

The phrase that caught my attention was “judicial casuistry.” The O.E.D. gives a more negative account of it than I would have thought necessary, quoting some anonymous figure as saying that it resolves cases of conscience by quibbling with God. I hope it includes the work of defense counsels in court, doing the best they can for their clients. In literary criticism, the question of casuistry would be: will my principles, honorably applied, cover all I have to say about the poem, or can I stretch my arms beyond them? The further question is: how did I get those principles in the first place, given the lack of an urging paradigm? Did I just subside upon the principles nearest my hand, these

being Eliot’s in my case, as they might well have been Valéry’s or Mallarmé’s or Leavis’s? It is too late for me to answer that question.

To resume: what are the humanities for? When I was a young teacher of English in Dublin, this question never arose in my hearing: it was taken for granted that it was a worthy thing to spend one’s life reading literature and teaching it to large classes of undergraduates. I spent the first three-and-a-half years of my working life as a junior administrative officer in the Department of Finance, a job that had all the merits of security and pension but, to me, no other gratification. It was a moment of great joy when Professor J. J. Hogan offered me a job as an assistant lecturer in his department. There was nothing better I could be doing. I had enjoyed the experience of reading for an arts degree, as it was called. The merit of it was self-evident, and since it was never called into question, there was no need to develop a theory in its favor. We lived by the customs of a liberal education. The word *liberal* did not need to be defined. The distinctive character of a liberal education was that it did not lead to any of the professions – law, medicine, engineering, architecture, and such – and was entirely independent of pragmatic need.

In 1968, we had what was called “the gentle revolution,” in which students demanded a voice in the governance of departments and faculties, and soon lost interest in the meetings they gained the privilege of attending; but they did not challenge the division of the university into departments and faculties, or even the choice of books they were required to read. Even when I came to teach at New York University, I never heard the question raised, why students were obliged to spend some part of their time reading

certain books. Nor has my choice of texts ever been questioned. I have assumed, without being especially intelligent about it, that my aim in teaching English, Irish, and American literature is to put students at least in the vicinity of memorable achievements. Ideally, I would put them in the full presence of such works. I have not been called upon to be more specific. When I included "Song of Myself" in a graduate course on modern poetry, no one disputed the choice. Only recently, I gather, has the teaching of literature ceased to be a self-evident good.

But we are now required to give reason for doing it. It won't suffice any longer to say: "I read and teach literature because I can, because I like it, I enjoy it, it is my version of intelligent pleasure, like listening to Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli playing Chopin's Ballade No. 1 in G Minor." Not enough; these are mere subjectivities, proclaimed. The problem – the trouble – is that we live in a predominantly instrumental culture. Reasons must be given. In our time, the only accredited value is that something leads to something else. We are obliged to show not only cause but consequence. The humanities are vulnerable because they do not lead to anything: they do not cure a disease or build a bomb.

In this predicament there are two attitudes that may be adopted. One is to assert that the humanities train their students to be more alive, more intelligent, more critical than they would otherwise be. Hillis Miller quotes, with approval, the passage in "The Resistance to Theory" in which Paul de Man writes:

What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism. It follows that, more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable

tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence. *Denis Donoghue*

A sentence further:

Those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit.¹⁶

An obvious question: how do we know an aberration when we see one? Aberrant by comparison with what? How is the ground established on which we can remove the masks? If "social" and "historical" are alike "ideological," how do we adjudicate the ideology or the ideologies? I assume that by an ideology we mean the set of values that at a particular time is taken for granted, without its being known as merely taken for granted. Roland Barthes wrote of ideologies as laws of culture that are quietly enforced as if they were laws of nature. On the theme of bringing to the fore such Bohemian qualities as destroy great practical enterprise, Kenneth Burke said that the motto for this endeavor might be: "when in Rome, do as the Greeks."¹⁷ Common to these aphorisms is the idea that literature "is no more than an interrogation of the world."¹⁸ It is the aim of the humanities to consider how the interrogation is effected, and the qualities of mind promoted in the exercise. In brief, we make our students more alert than they were before they took our courses. In Miller's terms, they become more sensitive to the lies they hear on TV.

The second attitude has more trouble in making its way. I have found the best expressions of it in Lionel Trilling's *Beyond Culture* and Stanley Fish's *Save the World on Your Own Time*.

In "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," Trilling expressed a feeling of exas-

Introduction peration that could hardly have been of merely a moment's weariness when he wondered:

if perhaps there is not to be found in the past that quiet place at which a young man might stand for a few years, at least a little beyond the competing attitudes and generalizations of the present, at least a little beyond the contemporary problems which he is told he can master only by means of attitudes and generalizations, that quiet place in which he can be silent, in which he can *know* something – in what year the Parthenon was begun, the order of battle at Trafalgar, how Linear B was deciphered: almost anything at all that has nothing to do with the talkative and attitudinizing present, anything at all but variations on the accepted formulations about *anxiety*, and *urban society*, and *alienation*, and *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, all the matter of the academic disciplines which are founded upon the modern self-consciousness and the modern self-pity.¹⁹

Stanley Fish, too, speaks of a student's years at college as an oasis, time-out, years in which to learn new skills, enjoy the experience of being at a distance from the other world. He maintains that "the job of someone who teaches in a college or a university is to (1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry they didn't know much about before; and (2) equip those same students with the analytical skills that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research should they choose to do so." Further:

You know the questions: Will it benefit the economy? Will it fashion an informed citizenry? Will it advance the cause of justice? Will it advance anything? Once again the answer is no, no, no, and no. At some level, of course, everything we ultimately do has some relationship to the education we have

received. But if liberal arts education is doing *its* job and not the job assigned to some other institution, it will not have as its aim the bringing about of particular effects in the world. Particular effects may follow, but if they do, it will be as the unintended consequences of an enterprise which, if it is to remain true to itself, must be entirely self-referential, must be stuck on itself, must have no answer whatsoever to the question, "what good is it?"

Why should a society pay good money to support such an institution, "an academy that puts at the center of its operations the asking of questions for their own sake?"²⁰ Why indeed? Fish has no ready answer except to say that professors and administrators, in their dealings with the sources of funding, should explain without apology what they are doing and why. The moneyed people will understand, or not. It remains that a liberal education seeks knowledge for its own sake; that is, independent of any sequel – "desirable though nothing come of it," a phrase I recall from Newman many years ago.

It is not my privilege to adjudicate between de Man and Trilling, or between Hillis Miller and Stanley Fish. I report of my own practice as a teacher. The demand I make of students is implicit, I never say the words. Still, it may be thought reasonable or exorbitant. When I am teaching, say, *Antony and Cleopatra*, I ask the students to pay attention to what is going on and, for the duration of the class, to nothing else. When I quote a passage –

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish;
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A tower'd citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't, that nod unto the world,
And mock our eyes with air: thou hast seen
these signs;
They are black vesper's pageants
(Act 4, scene 14, lines 2 – 8)

– I want the students to be suffused with it and to follow it as a conductor follows a musical score, a little distant from it but never away, never out of its reach. For the time being, there is nothing in the world but Antony losing himself, Shakespeare’s words making him almost content with his loss, nothing surviving but his appalled sense of what he had been. Outside the classroom, people are living their lives, or being lived by them; inside, only the play, the scene, Antony, Eros listening and answering with a word or two, Antony giving up, Shakespeare letting him loose from himself.

That is what I want as a teacher. Whether or not I can have anything more; whether or not I can ease the students toward that other stage of self-consciousness that Eliot wrote of, in which each of them might say that “what I am looking at is the world as seen by a particular mind,” Shakespeare’s in the event: that, I cannot say. But it would satisfy me if the students could experience, now and again, what Eliot intuited in his essay on John Marston, “a pattern behind the pattern into which the characters deliberately involve themselves; the kind of pattern which we perceive in our own lives only at rare moments of inattention and detachment, drowsing in sunlight.”²¹

A few years ago, I gave the Erasmus lectures at Notre Dame. I was in the University for a month. On the first Saturday, I went into Chicago to visit the Art Institute, not to see anything in particular, but many things in a kind of generality. In the event, I found myself stopped by Constantin Brâncusi’s *Golden Bird*, going further to look at other things, coming back to the Brâncusi, and staying there for twenty minutes or so.

The following Saturday, my daughter Emma was with me, and I brought her to Chicago. I wanted to show her *Golden Bird*.

I hope she was enchanted by it, as I was. I was not inclined to say anything about it, even to Emma. The pleasure was entirely gratuitous, a gift of culture and genius. If I were an art critic, I would be obliged to be expressive in the vicinity of the sculpture, but I am not. My themes in the Erasmus lectures were entirely other. I was content, in the lectures, to speak, to say whatever I had to say about the themes. Standing in front of *Golden Bird*, I was gratified not to have to be expressive, but to accept the gift as it was offered. I wonder, is that what T. J. Clark meant when he said, “I believe the distance of visual imagery from verbal discourse is the most precious thing about it”? Or has Hannah Arendt the better part of the debate, when she comes back to speech that she has never left?

Denis
Donoghue

- ¹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (1932; London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 475.
- ² Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church, 1300 – 1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 21.
- ³ Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013), 9, 17.
- ⁴ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 345.
- ⁵ Jacques Derrida, “The University without Condition,” in *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202; emphasis in original.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 235 – 236.
- ⁷ Jacques Derrida, Catherine Porter, and Edward P. Morris, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils,” *Diacritics* 13 (3) (Autumn 1983): 12 – 13.
- ⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3 – 4.
- ⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I, ch. 4, quoted in Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 15.
- ¹⁰ T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 122 – 123, 27; emphasis in original.
- ¹¹ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 344.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 347.
- ¹³ T. S. Eliot, “The Function of Criticism,” in *Selected Essays*, 24.
- ¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, “Religion and Literature,” in *Selected Essays*, 395 – 396; emphasis in original.
- ¹⁵ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1962), 471 – 472.
- ¹⁶ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 11.
- ¹⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (1932; Los Altos, Calif.: Hermes Publications, 1953), 119.
- ¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 135.
- ¹⁹ Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965), 5.
- ²⁰ Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18 – 19, 55, 154.
- ²¹ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 232.