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The Relevance and Resiliency of the Humanities

By Stephen C. Behrendt

Discussion has grown increasingly urgent among those involved in the humanities; threats to funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts are only the most highly visible indicators of what many call a “war on the humanities.” The issue is a familiar one. With everyone’s finances under increasing stress, there is mounting pressure to “cut back on nonessentials,” and among both educational institutions and the broader public community the humanities seem easy targets for the cutters and the pruners. There’s a general sense that the humanities are not very useful when it comes to objective goals like job opportunities, better paychecks, and career advancement. Even former president Barack Obama proclaimed in 2014 that “young people could make more money in skilled manufacturing than with art-history degrees.” His immediate backtracking—there’s “nothing wrong with an art-history degree” (qtd. in DeSantis)—only underscores what a throwaway the humanities have become in today’s all-for-profit culture, and the Trump administration’s declared intention to eliminate the NEH and the NEA further emphasizes the depth of this myopia. The NEH’s grim Congressional Budget Justification for fiscal year 2018 says it all, requesting only minimal funding for the “orderly closure of the agency” and stating that “no new grants or matching offers will be made beginning in FY 2018” (*Appropriations Request*). In what follows I discuss some of the stakes in the battle, suggest some strategies for coalition building, and contextualize the current wrangle by looking back some two centuries toward a comparably dire prognosis for art, culture, and creative humanism, concluding with a rallying cry from what may seem like an unlikely ally—today’s military. Some professional humanists have suggested that the humanities have increasingly lost

their way and therefore have only themselves to blame: what used to be a clear agenda in the great books tradition, they say, has deteriorated into high school courses in Harry Potter and the history of pop rock and into college courses like The Philosophy of *Star Trek* and The Art of the Comic Book. Notice, though, that no one suggests that the widely popular college course called Physics for Poets is unacceptably lowbrow or that Math in the City, Consumer Chemistry, and Extraterrestrial Life are mere soft courses.¹ If we consider what made the humanities such easy targets in the first place, we can, as engaged citizens in a society and culture whose priorities seem to be continually shifting, respond to misguided criticism of this sort. Doing so is not just wise; it is essential. And we have, perhaps to our surprise, eloquent and powerful allies in colleagues in the STEM disciplines whom we typically regard as adversaries. More important, we have the humanities themselves. Creatively refiguring and reconnecting the modes of thinking associated with the humanities and the STEM areas can—and will—work to the mutual benefit of both. In October 2013 David A. Hollinger, professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Berkeley, published a wonderfully sane essay called “The Rift: Can STEM and the Humanities Get Along?” Hollinger points out that the media noise about the supposed death of the humanities ignores “the deep kinship between humanistic scholarship and natural science.” The balkanizing shifts in the academic tectonic plates in all areas of teaching, scholarship, and learning in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, he writes, threaten “the ability of modern disciplines to provide—in the institutional context of universities—the services for which they have been designed.” Hollinger argues that the humanities constitute “the great risk takers in the tradition of the Enlightenment,” embracing as they routinely do the messy, risk-intensive areas of inquiry largely “left aside by the methodologically narrower, largely quantitative” disciplines. This long-standing disciplinary engagement with risk necessarily positions the humanities along those continually fluctuating “borderlands between *Wissenschaft* [knowledge] and opinion, between scholarship and ideology.” The inevitable product of the troubling questions that the humanities typically ask is critical thinking. While critical thinking both employs and relies on the empirical reasoning we associate with science, it nevertheless involves a large measure of imagination and speculation—of “what if?” The humanities stimulate that variety of

creative inquiry that arranges various components of “what is known” (and what is not known) in different, alternative configurations, often discovering among the apparent disconnections new and unsuspected connections. A century and a half ago, writing in *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill said that the greatest threat to all of us is the decline of that very sort of rugged, probing critical thinking that challenges our habit of lazy thinking—or of not thinking at all. Mill worried about what he called “the despotism of custom,” which he regarded as a collective social force that was in mid-nineteenth-century Western society increasingly warring against individuality and therefore against genuine liberty. Mill was adamant that the decline of critical thinking inevitably produces mediocrity—mediocrity that comes to characterize and over time erode entire societies, nations, cultures. No one leads; everyone follows, so that “public opinion now rules the world,” as he put it. And no one notices—or cares—that individual liberty is a casualty, because in this world of mediocrity people’s “thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name, on the spur of the moment, through the newspapers” (85). Substitute *talk radio* (and, increasingly, *social media* and *blogs*) for *newspapers*, and the relevance of Mill’s point immediately becomes apparent.

John Horgan, who teaches engineers at the Stevens Institute of Technology, in New Jersey, published a blog post for *Scientific American* titled “Why Study Humanities? What I Tell Engineering Freshmen.” He writes:

We live in a world increasingly dominated by science. And that’s fine. . . . But it is precisely *because* science is so powerful that we need the humanities now more than ever. In science, mathematics and engineering classes, you’re given facts, answers, knowledge, truth. Your professors say, “This is how things are.” They give you certainty. The humanities, at least the way I teach them, give you uncertainty, doubt and skepticism. . . . The humanities are subversive. They undermine the claims of all authorities, whether political, religious or scientific. . . . Science has told us a lot about ourselves, and we’re learning more every day. But the humanities remind us that we have an enormous capacity for deceiving ourselves.

I agree with Horgan’s assertion that “[t]he humanities are more about questions than answers.” That’s why I will keep coming back to ethics in what follows here. The humanities invite us—indeed, they require us—to deal with the persistent, inconvenient ethical questions for which fact-based, empirical approaches to the world don’t have the time, or the stomach.

This is a point that Martha Nussbaum likewise made when she wrote in 2010 that the disciplines we associate with the humanities are infused by “searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in” (7). This is precisely why, for Nussbaum, a professor of law and ethics, “science, rightly pursued, is a friend of the humanities rather than their enemy” (8). The Penn State mathematician Kira Hamman was thinking along similar lines when she wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in 2013, that “[b]oth the sciences and the humanities require deep creativity and intellectualism, an ability and a desire to use reason, and a willingness to change your mind.” These are too-often overlooked but undeniably important connections and affiliations that Nussbaum and Hamann cite, and so I want to press them further still.

From my own field of Romantic-era British literature, let me offer Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*, one of the perennial icons of popular literature that abounds with both intellectual and ethical questions about science and creativity, about stretching rules, crossing boundaries, and living—or failing to live—with the consequences of individual or collective decisions. Shelley’s friend and Europe’s first superstar poetic icon Lord Byron wrote about the intellectual and emotional high that comes with creative activity. Why write? Byron says:

’Tis to create, and in creating live
A being more intense, that we endow
With form our fancy, gaining as we give
The life we image ... (canto 3, stanza 6; 416)

Recently I asked a young doctoral student, who is also a poet, during the formal defense of his dissertation on poetry and critical theory, “Why write poetry?” “Why even bother?” I asked. His answer, instant and candid, was: “Why breathe?” Like Byron two centuries

ago, he understands the liberating potential of all imaginative activity, of creation, regardless of discipline or context. Creative activity, as Byron put it, enables us to “live / A being more intense” and fill our days with greater passion, greater life, than what our ordinary daily routine provides. And in creating, according to Byron, we gain and give, in equal degrees, life itself, lived intensely and imaginatively, with all its passions and pains.

But there is more to it than that: we need to live with what we create—and to take responsibility for it, too. After all, everything we say and write publicly is inherently political. It carries ethical implications for each of us and for everyone who encounters our work. That’s the terrible lesson that *Frankenstein* teaches. Ethics lies at the center of the humanities, both as an academic subject and as an intellectual engine of social thought in the broader culture.

The humanities remind us that we are all passengers together on this planetary ship called Earth. In our local social and professional units as well as in our collective citizenship in that ethical society to which we aspire, we need to open avenues to greater ethical awareness, not shut them down. But the so-called war on the humanities turns out to be a phony one, when we look more closely, an ideologically constructed conflict that does neither side any good—and both sides a lot of harm. Perhaps we need more thinking like that of the biologist Edward O. Wilson, author of the 1998 book *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. Wilson coined “consilience,” which he defines as “literally a ‘jumping together’ of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact-based theory across disciplines to create a common ground of explanation” (7). As examples, he offers phenomena as diverse as environmental protection and the neurobiology of aesthetics. And he lists among people who practiced this habit of mind Charles Darwin and Francis Bacon, Albert Einstein and the Marquis de Condorcet. To this list we might add Norbert Wiener, who coined the term *cybernetics*; Gregory Bateson, who famously applied it in anthropology; and Barry Commoner, whose first law of ecology neatly epitomizes it: “Everything is connected to everything else.”

The humanities and the STEM disciplines are fundamentally necessary to each other, both in academia and in our broad contemporary culture. When either side tries to go it alone, the other side is proportionally diminished, and everyone loses. “Without Contraries is No Progression,” William Blake wrote in the 1790s; he

also wrote that “Opposition is true Friendship” (*Marriage* 34). The Romantic-era Irish writer and educational reformer Elizabeth Hamilton wrote in 1811 that “[i]magination is not a simple faculty, but a complex power in which all the faculties of the mind participate.” Therefore, “the imagination of the person in whom they have all been cultivated will be rich and vigorous” (157, 158).² These observations are remarkably prescient and instructive and offer a clearer vision of what makes the world tick than many of our own empirical bean counters can manage today.

So how did our contemporary culture come to believe there’s something monstrous about the humanities? In our economically challenged and increasingly corporatized notion of education, the humanities have emerged as a sort of vampire sucking the lifeblood—that is, the funds—from a public body apparently better off were it rid of this imposition, cured of this disease, exorcised of this demon. “What good are the humanities, anyway?” their political, economic, and cultural detractors ask. At the heart of the question is that matter of “good.” What is “good”? Is it the same thing as “good for”? Asking what the humanities are good for implies that we can measure them in terms of what they do, how they do it, presumably how well, and perhaps especially for whom. After all, we can—more or less—do that in manufacturing, in construction, in the creation of genetically modified foods, and even in those educational programs that we now call STEM.

What happens, though, when the field can’t be measured in that way? One answer is simply to follow the money. In colleges and universities, students in the STEM fields (and their parents) assume that their investment of time and funds will lead not just to jobs but to good jobs. There’s that word again. What makes a job good? Salary, perks, options for advancement, general job satisfaction? Good gets measured in material ways. So too for the faculty members who teach those students. Reputation, professional advancement—and of course salary—are often tied to one’s success in attracting and keeping major financial support, whether federal, state, or corporate, and there’s no question that the lion’s share of funding goes to STEM disciplines. Max Nisen wrote in *Business Insider* in June 2013 that “humanities get a tiny fraction of the federal funding that STEM programs do. Many schools, public ones in particular, are already under huge financial pressure, so they’re going to focus more of their energies on the things they can get others to pay for.” According to this familiar

formula, if a discipline attracts and generates money, it's good; if it doesn't, it's superfluous. In 2012 the National Science Foundation's budget was over seven billion dollars (*NSF Requests*). In 2013, on the other hand, the combined budgets of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts amounted to less than what the Pentagon spent on one, ultimately unused, spy dirigible intended for deployment in Afghanistan ("National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Funding Levels"; "National Endowment for the Arts Appropriations History"; Brinkerhoff). More recently, the 2016 and 2017 appropriations for the NEH and NEA, requested at about \$148 million each, continued to be dwarfed by those for the National Science Foundation, which totaled well over seven billion dollars in those same years ("National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Funding Levels"; "National Endowment for the Arts Appropriations History"; *NSF Requests*). Meanwhile, military funding was budgeted at approximately \$593 billion in 2016 and \$602 billion in 2017, according to the Department of Defense ("Current US Defense Spending").

Financially incentivized measurement has become inseparable from how the humanities are regarded. Increasingly familiar instruments like the Common Core, standardized testing, and mathematically matrixed outcomes assessments reflect the push to quantify subject areas. Sadly, this debate has positioned humanists and the STEM people in the public discourse as adversaries—often unintentionally and certainly against the best interests of both—competing with one another for the ever-dwindling pot of gold.

The overspecialized but uninformed citizen is not just a modern phenomenon. Nearly a century and a half ago, lecturing in the ugly, polluted factory city of Birmingham in 1880, the British socialist manufacturer William Morris observed that even a supposedly well-educated man will "sit . . . down without signs of discomfort in a house, that with all its surroundings is just brutally vulgar and hideous: all his education has not done more for him than that" (88). How had this narrow and desensitized citizen evolved in a supposedly enlightened era? At the beginning of the nineteenth century his fellow Englishman, William Wordsworth, had written:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away . . . (568)

For Wordsworth, subscribing to a materialist worldview governed by an economics of “getting and spending” had cost us our hearts. Human life and experience were being reduced to a balance sheet, a double-entry ledger of the sort to which Charles Dickens’s Ebenezer Scrooge had sold his hard heart before the three spirits warmed it and brought it back to life. What Scrooge had lost, of course, was his humanity. Here, then, is the connection—right at the level of language—between that individual, personal humanity and those interrelated areas we call the humanities. Ironically, when I teach *A Christmas Carol*, which Dickens wrote in 1843, I always ask my students how old they think Scrooge is. The usual answer is mid-fifties, which, if we do the math, means he was born in about 1790, the year in which Byron was born and only a few years before Percy Bysshe Shelley and Felicia Hemans were. So, I ask my students, why is Scrooge not a passionate Romantic, like them, but rather a hard, heartless, penny-pinching materialist without human kindness? What was different? The usual answer is that he chose money and materialism (his usurious countinghouse) over beauty and aesthetics (his lost love, Belle). It’s an answer whose moral significance is perhaps best measured not by the Keynesian formulas of the economist but rather by the imaginative calculus of the humanist.

Wordsworth and Morris—and surely Dickens—believed the increasingly materialist, mechanical, product-centered nineteenth century had cost us the infinitely responsive human heart: not just feelings or emotion but also passion and imagination. In 1821 Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote *A Defence of Poetry* in response to his friend Thomas Love Peacock’s satirical essay *The Four Ages of Poetry*. Peacock claimed that all the arts in the modern age are hopelessly and irreversibly deteriorated and that contemporary artists and their works are consequently less and less valuable, both as art (and artists) and as practical—that is, useful—products of culture. What good is art, Peacock says, when technology, science, industry, and profit now gauge value? Shelley’s response addresses the growing cultural prioritizing of empirical data at the expense of something else:

We have more moral, political and historical wisdom, than
we know how to reduce into practice; we have more

scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated . . . by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. . . . We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. . . . [M]an, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave. (530)

Shelley's point was that by 1821 society had become so enamored of data it had lost the capacity to see how they figured into any larger social, moral, intellectual, or cultural calculus.

What's to be done? Here is what Shelley suggested:

The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination. (517)

Similarly, Albert Einstein declared, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research" (97).

Such a statement from one of the greatest scientific thinkers of the modern era seems out of character with our cultural stereotype of the empirical scientist buried in the laboratory. But Einstein understood that strict factual knowledge does not offer the only route to the destination: as he put it, "I believe in intuition and inspiration. . . . At times I feel certain I am right while not knowing the reason" (97). Indeed, in an apocryphal remark attributed to him he asserted that "creative imagination is the essential element in the intellectual equipment of the true scientist" (cxxx). Nor was Einstein alone in the priority he placed on the creative imagination; Thomas Edison supposedly observed that the inventor must first imagine that which she or he then invents. The imagination is a singularly vital part of

anyone's intellectual makeup, because, as Shelley put it, it "awakens and enlarges the mind" by presenting it with "a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought" (517). This domain of the "unapprehended" is the arena in which the humanities operate.

Many years ago, as an undergraduate student, I read E. M. Forster's novel *Howard's End*. I have never forgotten Forster's epigraph: "Only connect." That simple phrase has guided me through more than four decades of inseparably intertwined teaching and scholarship. It's the imagination, finally, that encourages us to discover—and then to explore—the often unsuspected relations that exist among things we might not normally place in the same frame. Blake demonstrated the limitations of empiricism by pointing out that if people are made up of nothing more than the combined data provided by their senses, as some eighteenth-century philosophers had proposed, then "[f]rom a perception of only 3 senses or 3 elements none could deduce a fourth or fifth." Blake says because "Man[']s desires are limited by his perceptions . . . none can desire what he has not perceiv'd" ("There Is No Natural Religion"), which would seem to rule out everything from God and heaven to pleasurable air travel or government without taxation.

I emphasize this point because it is where we can begin deciding what good the humanities are. It's not easy, because the primary disciplines among the humanities have always been less interested in good—that is, empirically verifiable—answers than in troublesome and often provocative questions. This kind of imaginatively questioning attitude lies behind the line that John F. Kennedy borrowed from George Bernard Shaw when, in a speech to the Irish parliament in June 1963, he said, "Other people . . . see things and say why? But I dream things that never were and I say, why not?"³

Because the imagination is inherently both playful and curious, it disrupts expectations by thinking in ways that today we call outside the box. Critics of the imagination—and of the humanities, which are presumed guilty by association—overlook that the world is filled with things whose nature, identity, and even value are often relative and shifting rather than absolute and stable. It's the duty of the humanities to teach us about ourselves as flexible moral, ethical, and spiritual citizens. They do this by teaching us about those people and those things that are not us, by sharpening our abilities to observe and to learn, by stimulating that variety of love that is grounded in selfless interest in the well-being of others who may be complete

strangers to us. The humanities empower us to “imagine intensely and comprehensively,” as Shelley put it, and in the process they make us not just better citizens but also more humane ones. Teaching us about our own and others’ humanity is a goal that is more worthwhile—indeed more essential—if we are to survive in a world whose ever-increasing fragility is in our hands.

I ran into a striking application of what Shelley is talking about in an article by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas McGuire called “War Literature, the Constitution, and Fostering Reluctant Killers.” McGuire, who teaches at the United States Air Force Academy, in Colorado Springs, writes that the study of the literature of war “puts a human face on war, an *individual* human face” (25). In doing so, the literature of war reminds us that “war always squanders humans, a fact that complicates our commitment to the sanctity of the individual” (26). For McGuire, the professional soldier charged with training others to conduct warfare and in the process to take lives, humanists need to ask the troubling questions of defining and conducting what he calls “just wars.” For him, “rather than being antithetical to the military profession the humanities constitute an indispensable component of the military professional’s formation.” They help give the military professional—as they help give all of us—“a deeper appreciation of the value of human life and culture, an appreciation that can translate into more humane and compassionate leadership” (29). The humanities counteract war’s tendency to depersonalize the combatants on both sides by reminding us of the human faces and the sanctity of all life and thereby making each soldier at least a reluctant killer. For McGuire, as for Shelley and his Romantic-era contemporaries, “[t]he humanities keep us honest and human” (29); they teach citizens to recognize and appreciate the bonds of fundamental, ethical humanity that link us all, regardless of party, faction, nation, gender—or whatever—even when we must do battle against our fellow citizens of Earth.

It’s my strong conviction, then, that the humanities are good for taking us out of our isolated selves and situating us among others who are both like and unlike ourselves, helping us see and measure, imagine and create. The humanities foster creative, critical, and ethical thinking in every area of our individual and collective lives. They help us engage actively with the fundamental issues—the core questions—of individual and collective liberty. They don’t just help us think; they require us to do so. If there really is a war on the

humanities in our culture, then the humanities themselves offer the best antiwar medicine I can think of, and the most humanely useful and restorative one. They humanize us. That—among so much else—is what the humanities are good for. And that is why they must be courageously fought for, passionately defended, and resolutely preserved.

Notes

1. Physics for Poets, which is Physics C1001y at Columbia University, is a course widely offered nationwide; Math in the City is Mathematics 453 at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln; Consumer Chemistry is Chemistry 125IN at Pima Community College in Tucson, AZ; Extraterrestrial Life is Physics 11500 at the University of Chicago. [↪](#)
2. Notice how Hamilton explicitly connects the understanding and the imagination with the heart, by which she means the complex constellation of moral, emotional, spiritual, and intuitive sentiments and responses. [↪](#)
3. The phrase comes from Shaw's *Back to Methuselah: A Metabiological Pentateuch*. It is often misattributed to both Robert F. Kennedy and Edward Kennedy. [↪](#)


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