

TOBY MILLER

THE END OF THE HUMANITIES

THERE ARE SO MANY ENDINGS that aren't. Frank Sinatra retires but returns. Michael Jordan finishes his career then restarts it. Bill Clinton is the Comeback Kid. A failed candidate for the California governorship says "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore" in what is billed as his last press conference. Six years later, he wins the Presidency. In Australian football, commentators refer to players recovered from injury or defeat as making "The greatest comeback since Lazarus." Don Cherry opposes the Canadian government over the 2003 invasion of Iraq then announces "this could be the end" of *Coach's Corner* because he is, actually, a rather dull, predictable devil servant. Sadly, of course, it wasn't.

The worlds of entertainment, sports, and politics are littered with endings that are not, from "The End" followed by "But James Bond will return in..." to wee Matthew Broderick quizzing the crowd as to why they've stayed after the credits in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (John Hughes, 1986), finding a way to broker Brechtian disantiation with John Hughes humour ("It's over. Go home"). How right Godard was to say "A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order."

"The End of the Humanities" is clearly a silly title. It risks mockery for several reasons, the most obvious one being that it is easily disproved by history: Tomorrow you'll wake up and there'll still be a humanities. And there may be many tomorrows.

But I actually think the end is coming, at least in the United States. The US version of the humanities is dying, if not rhetorically (it's hard to shut them up) then numerically. Here's why.

I draw on data presented in *Blow Up the Humanities*¹ to make my case. To spare you endless citations, support for my nutty claims is contained there. But this is not just a crib, reiteration, or free version of that book. It's also a response to reactions to my ideas, notably in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*² and various venues where I've presented the argument over the last year or so, such as Westminster University, the School of Oriental and African Studies, King's College London, the US National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education, the Cultural Studies Association (US), and the European Consortium of Humanities Research Institutes and Centres. I have also looked at

press articles on the book.² I know it's neurotic to collect and promote reviews, and tedious to read them. Institutional narcissism constitutes the ends of academia these days. Pardon me etc.

The point is that *Blow Up the Humanities* has provoked some interesting reactions that have stimulated me to rethink part of it, to rethink the notion that it is finished, and to write this piece. Let's begin with an adumbration of the book's main argument: the humanities in the United States are unpopular with students, unpopular with politicians, and unpopular with bureaucrats.

The Humanities' share of majors stands at 8-12% of the nation's 110,000 undergraduates. That's less than half the figure from the 1960s and the lowest point since the Second World War. Downturns in student interest align with two phenomena: prolonged recessions, such as those curated by Republican Administrations from Ronald Reagan to the George Bushes, and an emerging passion for seemingly instrumental study areas such as business and government, especially in public schools designed for the proletariat and the middle class.

Between 1970-1971 and 2003-2004, English majors declined from 7.6% to 3.9% of the national total, other languages and literatures from 2.5% to 1.3%, philosophy and religious studies from 0.9% to 0.7%, and history from 18.5% to 10.7%. By contrast, business enrollments increased 176%, and communication studies shot up 616%. Those numbers form the backdrop to the humanities in US higher education. We must recognize that reality and see past the rare privilege that shields a tiny number of universities and faculty from such slings and arrows.

The government's preferences are as clear as those of the students. The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided not a cent to humanities research; science received US\$3 billion. Barack Hussein Obama II's 2011 State of the Union address, which called for increased expenditure on math and science, did not mention the humanities. The Republican Party has announced its desire to exterminate the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) (which gives a small portion of its paltry funds to universities anyway), National Science Foundation (NSF) grants went from being five times the size of their NEH equivalents in 1979 to 33 times larger in 1997. In 2007, the NEH received 0.5% of the National Institutes of Health's budget and 3% of the NSF's, while in 2010, a pitiful 0.45% of Federal research support went to the humanities.

No wonder campus administrators cut and cut. In 2009, just 53% of humanities faculty was in full-time employment, and an even smaller proportion in tenurable positions. Compared with other fields, tenure-track hiring in language and literature occurs at two-thirds the national average.

Most people teaching the humanities work full-time in second-tier schools with gigantic course loads, often on limited-term contracts, or as freeway professors, driving feverishly between teaching jobs to cobble together a living. Thousands of adjuncts each year await last-minute phone calls and messages asking them to teach large omnibus survey courses, because tenured or junior faculty are doing their "own" work. All too many students go looking for the "professor" who taught them last quarter—but that "professor" didn't have an office, isn't back this year, and has in fact been forgotten by all concerned other than the personnel department, which has closed its files until the call goes out again for the reserve army of the professorate to emerge from highway hell in time of need.

Meanwhile, the comparative monetary worth of tenurable faculty is diminishing. In 2003, health academics were paid an average of US\$6,000 more than in 1987, during which time the humanities average declined by a thousand dollars; in 2005-2006, a business academic cost twice as much as a humanities one, compared to one and a half times as much twenty years earlier.

How did this happen?

Fifty years ago, the great political theorist Ralph Miliband addressed the state of the humanities in the US. He found a bizarre mixture of "the hierarchical graces of Europe" and a "romantic vision of vanished America, rural, small-town, face-to-face"⁴—something that never was versus something quickly lost. How right he was to identify the contingent nature of this fantasy.

The vast growth in higher education in the US since that time has taken place among the lower-middle and working classes. They enrol in state schools that are more vocational than private ones, with supply and demand some distance from narcissistic fantasies of small seminars and ethical self-styling. The vast majority doesn't want a gentleman's education or a lady's finishing school as per liberal arts colleges and Ivies.

Yet my analysis seems out of joint in the context of the public rhetoric of and about the humanities, where debate thrives over literary representations of race and gender, the canon, cultural politics, and so on, and the *New York Times* just can't help itself each time the Modern Language Association's annual convention rolls around and an ashine column is fired off in the direction of a junior professor who has dared to undertake a queer reading of Jane Austen.

The disjuncture between that public struggle over developments in textual analysis and the real political economy of the humanities is easily explained: there are two humanities in the United States. The distinction between them, which is far from absolute but heuristically and statistically persuasive, places literature, history, and philosophy on one side (Humanities One), and communication studies on the other (Humanities Two).

Humanities One primarily resides in Research-One private universities, wee liberal arts colleges, and a few privileged state schools, where the *bourgeoisie* and its favoured subalterns are tutored in finishing school and graduate students are taught to believe they will reach such people after completing their doctorates. Humanities One is venerable, powerful, and tends to determine how the sector is discussed in public—but almost no one studies it.

Humanities Two is the humanities of everyday state schools and is focused more on undergraduates' job prospects—but has no media profile. Humanities One dominates rhetorically. Humanities Two dominates numerically. Thousands of graduate students are chucked out of the system based on the fantasy that these two humanities are one and will continue as currently constituted.

This class division corresponds to the way that federal funding fetishizes the two humanities away from more prized forms of knowledge, which are cultivated via the NSF and the National Institutes of Health. It must end (so to speak).

Not everyone connects these trends to fiscal crises caused by Republican spend-don't-tax incompetence, bipartisan imperialism, and the proletarianization of higher education. A former President of Wesleyan and Emory Universities, William Chace, suggests the decline happened as a consequence of "the failure of English across the country to champion, with passion, the books they teach and to make a strong case to undergraduates that the knowledge of those books and the tradition in which they exist is a human good in itself." He laments a focus on "secondary considerations (identity studies, abstruse theory, sexuality, film and popular culture)." The arch-bureaucrat recalls his salad student days as a period of "self-reflection, innocence, and a casual irresponsibility about what was coming next."⁵ I have to give some room to such remarks in order to perform fairness. But even amongst undergrads at the Ivy Leagues and little liberal arts colleges, where the traditional humanities still enrol pretty well, the tradition of Western civilization, that

hybrid we are meant to teach as if it were otherwise, is not looking so good as a guide to the pursuit of life, liberty, and Facebook friends. Nations that grew wealthy from slavery, imperialism, war, colonialism, and capitalism are in disarray. They have quarrelled what they can quarry and out-sourced what they can outsource. Queering Jane Austen won't cut it.

In any event, I've clearly been proceeding inductively here. Having established that there is a crisis in things called "the humanities," we now need to ask, what *are* they?

In 1965, the United States Congress listed the following humanities fields: archaeology, comparative religion, ethics, history, languages and linguistics, literature, jurisprudence, philosophy, and history, theory, and criticism of the arts. The Mellon Foundation, probably the nation's biggest funder of the sector at upwards of US\$200 million a year, privileges history, literature, and philosophy. The *New York Times* defines the humanities as languages, literature, the arts, history, cultural studies, philosophy, and religion. The bias towards literary criticism in such definitions is particularly strong. The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), for example, which represents dozens of professional associations with memberships between 500 and 150,000 people, describes the high prides of criticism Matthew Arnold as a "great Victorian spokesman for humanities and culture."⁶ Arnold elevated criticism over other forms of knowledge as a focus on "*the best that is known and thought in the world.*"⁷ 1875: 45. This implied both a disciplined approach to the materiality of texts—what they say—along with a concern for the forms of life they represent.⁸

I think this is the crucial link between the *Times* ridiculing queer theory and the self-legislating sphere of Humanities One, in all its vainglorious isolation. For this is actually about the US's incarnation of national self-formation and imperial leadership, in the days before such things were the province of technological knowledge, and the often progressive legacies of that self-annointment. Hence Congress announcing in the 1960s that "the world leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit."⁹

This perspective has a long tradition in Romantic subjectivity. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* argued that culture ensured "conformity to laws without the law."¹⁰ Universities must use aesthetics to generate "morally practical precepts."¹¹ schooling people to transcend particular interests via the development of a "*public* sense, *i.e.* a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation... to weight its judgment with the collective reason of mankind."¹² His *Political Writings* envisage "*emergence from... self-inward immaturity*" independent of religious, governmental, or commercial direction, animated by the desire to lead rather than consume.¹³ For Coleridge, "the fountain heads of the humanities" are "watching over" the sciences, "cultivating and enlarging the knowledge already possessed" because "we must be men in order to be citizens."¹⁴

In imperial Britain, the humanities formed "the core of the educational system and were believed to have peculiar virtues in producing politicians, civil servants, Imperial administrators and legislators" because they incarnated and indexed "the arcane wisdom of the Establishment"¹⁵—what Arnold called "that powerful but at present somewhat narrow-toned organ, the modern Englishman."¹⁶ A century ago, US universities were dominated in their turn by moral philosophy, Latin, and Greek in an attempt to match and transcend the "narrow-toned organ."

The two humanities represent residual and emergent hegemonic forms of this history.

Humanities One has been about recreating Europeanness as per Milliband, Arnold, and so on. Its legacy is the relative autonomy accorded such missions, its beneficiaries often quite radical thinkers. Humanities Two is about managing a varied population, divided by language and class as it always was, but with the need for all to undergo the civilizing impulse in order to indoctrinate and train. This division jeopardizes the future of both tendencies in a world of diminished interest in the traditional humanities, and minimal recognition of the more popular humanities. Does blowing up the humanities mean exploding them with an incendiary device, or re-inflating them as a *ballon d'essai*?

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) welcomes *Wired* magazine's promulgation in 2010 of a "Neoliberal Arts."¹⁷ The Association proudly advises that "*Wired* Names the Neoliberal Arts—And They Look a Lot Like AACU's Essential Learning Outcomes." The "neoliberal arts" are described as "higher learning for highly evolved humans." This buys into two, seemingly contradictory, impulses. On the one hand, neoliberalism stands for an utterly depoliticised norm, where change, choice, chance, and competition are the vocabulary. Conversely, evolution, despite its mandate in change, is about very, very slow responsiveness to altered material circumstances. *Wired*'s curriculum is banally obvious. It invokes statistics, diplomacy, culture, thought, communication, and nature, albeit with updated applications—Humanities One meets Two, with very little added.

But while that option is flawed, the push for something new simply has to be joined—and changed. The AACU says "a consensus is emerging about the kind of education that Americans need to thrive in a knowledge-intensive economy, a globally engaged democracy, and a society where innovation is essential."¹⁸ Employers clearly indicate that they want college graduates, regardless of discipline, with knowledge of technology, cultural diversity, and globalization. *Forbes* magazine worries that state investment in apparently instrumental subjects such as engineering only engages half the needs of innovation and growth, because it ignores "creativity, artistry, intuition, symbology, fantasy, emotions." This bias must go, in favour of curricula designed to form "whole-brain scientists," unlike the narrow outcomes produced by state funding stimuli. Most engineers and technologists work outside academia and must hence function in mixed company, so their training should also be mixed, as per liberal education.¹⁹ And the ACLS has recognized that its mission must be wider than the world imagined by *Hilfretars*, via "the foundations of aesthetic, ethical, and cultural values," which expressly include anthropology, psychology, and sociology.²⁰

So what should happen in the US?

This is where *Blow Up the Humanities* seemed to tail off in the eyes of readers and listeners. Miller got reasonable marks for his critique, though some thought it was rubbish or already well known. But he fell down on his prescriptions. They lacked detail. What was to be Humanities Three?

It must derive from what I see as the intellectual core that is common across both forms of the humanities: the struggle for meaning—how it is established and disestablished, and what it is. This is clearly central to historical interpretation, philosophical speculation, textual analysis, linguistic training, legal precedent, political theory, religious superstition, cultural production, and socio-cultural organization. Synthesizing and highlighting these commonalities inside a more comprehensive and materialist method would equip students for contemporary citizenship and work.

Here is the future for the humanities: comprehensive, omnibus survey courses about how meaning is made, circulated, and received in all media—running across science, capital, fiction, law,

science, sport, news, history, and politics. That means undertaking research into these topics and associated fields, with necessary *foi* on business, government, labour, and demography; breaking down the binaries of aesthetics from politics as part of dwelling in a networked, competitive, global labour market and citizen pool. In policy terms, that means arguing for a new National Research Council that will break down the antiquated binaries of a bygone age, allowing people who study media audiences from communications or film to work with political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists to do so.

The humanities' marginal status in the US derives from the fact that we are regarded as a super-structural ornament. The economic reductionism abjured by the humanities is no longer a sustainable alibi for dodging the power and applicability of numbers and structures. The taste for interpretation, for single-text analysis, for the Romantic elevation of consciousness, for a hermeneutics of suspicion, for a notion of ethical incompleteness, remains vibrant, even foundational. As the object of analysis undergoes multiple transformations, and becomes a force of material as much as symbolic power, attention must turn to theorizing the economy and its relations to culture.

To be more specific: here's a quiz that borrows from *Blow Up the Humanities* to suggest some questions one might address when constructing classes on uplifting books, or sending young *littérateurs* onto the freeway in search of the non-Research One exit. Try it out on your Friends at a January tailgate party or a ballpark next summer if conversation is flagging. Do the literature professors among you know:

- the number of books sold in the countries you study?
 - how many people buy or borrow books each year, and what proportion read virtual or material versions?
 - which companies dominate publishing and why?
 - how many publishers there are now versus ten or 20 years ago?
 - empirical research on forms of reading?
 - how books are optioned for adaptation as films?
- Can you explain:

- the business structure of the industry?
- the experience of working in it as a forester, editor, or driver?
- the relationships of novelists, agents, and editors?
- how books appear in the front of chain stores (or are never in stock)?
- the role of the International Publishers Association, the Pan African Booksellers Association, the Book Industry Study Group, the Publishers Database for Responsible and Ethical Paper Sourcing, the Federation of Indian Publishers, the Fédération des Éditeurs Européens, the Society of Publishers in Asia, and the Book Industry Environmental Council?
- cultural policies affecting publishers and libraries?
- why the market for books of literary theory and criticism is dramatically shrinking?
- the relative environmental impact of e-books versus paper ones?

Further, are you teaching classes about, or does anyone in your department explain to students, the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which jeopardizes fair use by turning digital works into commodity forms and criminalizing their appropriation, or how the International Federation of Reproduction Rights Organizations goes about its business? Do you study how the industry man-

ages innovation and experimentation? Or why people say books are dying when the UK, for example, is experiencing a golden age of volume and sales, and worldwide there are now more iPhone applications for books than games?

It asks a lot to expect this to lie within a single prof's interests and competence. So we must get over the fact that collaborative work remains frowned upon—or at least not understood—in the humanities, because that further entrenches our backwardness as we over-commit to the single-authored monograph's monastic model of knowledge.

There are important innovations in the humanities that can, of course, be drawn on here. I am fortunate to have experienced interdisciplinarity. Before being disrupted by 1990s managerialist bureaucrats kissing up and kicking down, Griffith and Murdoch Universities in Australia were remarkable sites of teaching and research, founded on problem-solving rather than scholarly specialization. I taught at both of them in their heydays, receiving a lot more than I gave.

We worked in teams, so courses would quite naturally see collaborators whose knowledge arched across ethnomethodology, literary theory, political economy, public policy, communications, film studies, history, and philosophy. This was not the interdisciplinarity so often crowed about in the humanities—interdisciplinarity without multiple languages, numbers, ethnography, geography, or experiments. It was much more challenging. I have since worked with such models in research teams that have generated books, articles, journals, and seminars. They function best with young scholars who want to do something new rather than feather nests. I see something similar, from the outside, in McGill's marriage of communication studies and art history and the way anthropology and communications work at the Universidad Autónoma de México's Ixtapalapa and Cuajimalpa campuses.

I also admire the "new" literary history's tripartite approach to analyzing texts, what Roger Chartier calls the reconstruction of "older readings from their sparse and multiple traces"; a focus on "the text itself, the object that conveys it, and the act that grasps it"; and an identification of "the strategies by which authors and publishers tried to impose an orthodoxy or a prescribed reading."²¹ Existing approaches must be supplemented to account for linguistic translations, material publications, promotional paratexts, reading practices, ecological impacts, and the like. Texts are contingent sites that accrete and attenuate meanings as they rub up against, trope, and are tropped by other fictional and factual texts, social relations, and material objects, then disposed of by ragpickers—all those occasions that allow them to exist, or declare their moment to be over.

In short, we must consider the life cycle of meaning as commodity signage. Engagements with semiotic qualities must be supplemented, and sometimes supplanted, by an account of the conditions under which meanings are made, circulated, received, interpreted, critiqued, and discarded, considering all the shifts and shocks that characterize their existence as cultural commodities, their ongoing renewal as the temporary "property" of varied, productive workers and publics. A text is a passage across space and time, its life remade again and again by institutions, discourses, and practices of manufacture, circulation, reception, and reuse.

In the case of fiction, that means knowing which companies make books, their processes of production and distribution, systems of cross-subsidy and profit, the complicity of educational canons with business plans in the circulation of texts, press coverage of prizes, and the carbon footprint of culture.

Such questions are rarely posed in the humanities—the who, what, when, where, why, how,

and effect of textuality. The more familiar and comfortable world of the seminarian herment ablaze, interpreting meaning left, right, and centre, remains hegemonic in doctoral programs and subsidized books. Elsewhere—not so much.

Wealthy universities may well be reinventing the humanities for the tablet-wielding rather than tab-popping generation, such that the digital humanities newbie ferrets amiably around for maps of Seven Diaks in order to enrich the experience of studying Dickens; but what will that mean for the student down the road in the state school?

Humanities One and Two must merge. They must learn from one another, with the philosophical focus of One meeting the institutional focus of Two. They must find common cause, then reach out to colleagues and fellow-travellers in other parts of campus and the wider political economy, be they scientists, publishers, librarians, creationists, or gamers, be they precarious, tenured, or wonky. The centrality of a new, refurbished, collectivist humanities to rebalancing economy and society must be asserted to all these players in a way that is credible to social movements, workers, and policy makers. Otherwise it will be the end. And not before time. Or blue eyes won't come back. He left the building a while ago.

NOTES

- 1 Toby Miller, *Blow Up the Humanities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).
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- 3 Bruce Walsh, "Your Humanities Degree May Soon Become Ancient History," *Metro* (New York), July 15, 2012, <http://www.metro.us/newyork/freestyle/education/2012/07/15/your-humanities-degree-may-soon-become-ancient-history/>; *Publisher's Weekly*, July 30, 2012, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-4399-0983-6>; Scott McDaniel, "Bye the Humanities," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 27, 2013, <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/03/27/essay-digital-humanities>.
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- 5 William M. Chace, "The Decline of the English Department," *American Scholar*, Fall 2009, <http://www.theamericanscholar.org/the-decline-of-the-english-department>.
- 6 George Levine, Peter Brooks, Jonathan Culler, Marjorie Garber, E. Ann Kaplan, and Catherine R. Simpson, "Speaking for the Humanities," *Occasional Paper 7* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1989), http://archives.acs.org/opa7_Speaking_for_Humanities.htm.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1875).
- 9 National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965 (P. L. 89-209), 1965, <http://www.nfa.gov/about/Legislation/Legislation.html>.
- 10 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (New York: Hackett, 1962), 86.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 13 Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. H. S. Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54.
- 14 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State According to the Idea of Each*, II: 149. Sermons, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: William Pickering, 1839), 46.
- 15 Graham Hough, "Crisis in Literary Education," *Crisis in the Humanities*, ed. J. H. Plumb (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 96-109.
- 16 Arnold, x.
- 17 Debra Humphrey, "Wired Names: the Neoliberal Arts—And They Look a Lot Like AAC&U's Essential Learning Outcomes," *Association of American Colleges and Universities* (blog), October 27, 2010, <http://blog.aacu.org/index.php/2010/10/29/wired-names-the-neoliberal-arts>.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Mark Mills and Julio Ottino, "We Need More Renaissance Scientists," *Forbes*, June 3, 2009, <http://www.forbes.com/2009/06/03/pbtd-engineering-science-djyton-christensen-mark-mills-innovation-research.html>.
- 20 "Frequently Asked Questions," American Council of Learned Societies website, <http://www.acs.org/info/Default.aspx?id=198>.
- 21 Roger Chartier, "Texts, Printings, Readings," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 154-175.