

“Particularizing the Humanities”

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“In looking back on the great works of genius in former times, we are sometimes disposed to wonder at the little progress which has since been made in poetry, and in the arts of imitation in general.”¹ Thus William Hazlitt at the beginning of the third of his *Lectures on English Poetry*, delivered early in 1818. The lecture was on the poetry of Shakespeare and Milton; and the puzzle Hazlitt was dealing with is surely a real one. Why was the poetry of his day not *obviously* superior to the works of these two great English poets, in the way that so many other things in his day—from politics to medicine to the physical sciences—so clearly *were* superior to their Elizabethan and Restoration counterparts? Hazlitt takes up the theme (and often borrows whole

¹“Shakespeare and Milton,” in *Lectures on English Poetry*; reprinted in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt* P. P. Howe (ed.) (J. M Dent & Sons: London and Toronto, 1930) Volume 5: 44.

passages) from an essay first published in *The Morning Chronicle* in 1814, and republished in his essay collection, *The Round Table*.² That well-known exploration was entitled, “Why the Arts are not Progressive?—A Fragment.”

The heart of Hazlitt’s answer to this question is to be found pretty much word for word in each of these three places, so he must have liked it; it’s encapsulated in the characteristic sentences that follow:

What is mechanical, reducible to rule or capable of demonstration, is progressive, and admits of gradual improvement: what is not mechanical, or definite, but depends on feeling, taste, and genius, very soon becomes stationary or retrograde, and loses more than it gains by transfusion. . . . For most persons, finding what wonderful advances have been made in biblical criticism, in chemistry in mechanics, in geometry, astronomy, &c., i.e. in things depending on mere inquiry and experiment or on absolute demonstration, have been led hastily to conclude that there was a general tendency in the efforts of the human intellect to improve by repetition, and, in all other arts and institutions, to grow perfect and mature by time.³

² “Why the Arts are not Progressive?—A Fragment,” in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt* P. P. Howe (ed.) (J. M Dent & Sons: London and Toronto, 1930) Volume 4: 160-164.

³ “Shakespeare and Milton,” *op. cit.* 44-45.

Hazlitt thinks, in short, we can expect progress only in domains “reducible to rule.”

I’ll return to Hazlitt’s question later. But let me point out first, that in an age of magnificent progress in the sciences, pure and applied, we humanists have to be able to answer a different question; one very like Hazlitt’s question and connected to it. The knowledge we acquire, the learning we transmit, the traditions we inherit and study and value, presuppose the continuing pertinence to us here and now of human artifacts made by others, long (and not-so-long) ago and far (and not-so-far) away. The question is, Why?

Aristotle is only an obstacle to our understanding of biology. Even Newton’s *Principia* can be safely ignored by the modern student of physics. Why do humanists return to the past if what we seek is the truth? If Hazlitt’s answer is right, one reason some of these objects remain worthy of our attention is that they have a kind of excellence that has not been superseded. And that would help with *our* question, since I do not think our civilization is so degraded that we have to defend giving attention to what is excellent.

But accepting Hazlitt’s claim that the arts are not progressive is not enough to defend the continuing relevance of humanistic study of the past. For by the humanities, clearly, we mean more than Hazlitt meant by “poetry and the arts of imitation”; we mean, to begin with, as I have recently

suggested, not just or not so much the practice but the study of these, and also the study of the widest range of the cultural artifacts of human civilizations, past and present, including artifacts that no one would claim to find interesting because of their excellence.

I want to focus today on a defense of the study of the long ago, not because I have no interest in the far away. But in the age of globalization, I think the message that we need a cosmopolitan education has been widely accepted, both here in the United States and around the world. Why do we in the humanities insist on the continuing relevance of the works of the past?

Let me exemplify the continuing utility of a humanistic education by revealing that the very word “humanities” elicits from the recesses of my memory a passage from the beginning of Cicero’s oration in defense of Archias, the poet, a passage I learned high school.

For when Archias first left boyhood, and turned from those arts by which young boys are gradually molded *ad humanitatem*, he devoted himself to the study of writing, first of all at Antioch—for he was born there in a noble place—which was formerly a famous and rich city, abundant in the most learned men and the most liberal

studies, and there he succeeded speedily in showing himself superior to all in talent and in fame.⁴

It's true that *humanitas* can just mean “human nature, humanity.”⁵ But it's clear enough that what Cicero has in mind here when he says “ad humanitatem” is a second sense of the term: “*Mental cultivation befitting a man, liberal education, good breeding, elegance of manners or language, refinement,*” as Lewis and Short's Latin dictionary has it. And, picking up on the mention of a liberal education there, let's recall another phrase that goes with humanities—the liberal arts. Cicero refers to these when he says of Archias's native city of Antioch that it was “*liberalissimisque studiis adfluenti,*” rich in the most liberal studies. The *studia liberales* were, of course, studies (to borrow from Lewis and Short again) “*befitting a freeman.*”⁶ When Cicero says Archias's boyhood education molded him “ad humanitatem,” then, he must mean that it provided him with an upbringing befitting a gentleman, a free man; and he must have understood that

⁴ “Nam ut primum ex pueris excessit Archias, atque ab eis artibus quibus aetas puerilis ad humanitatem informari solet se ad scribendi studium contulit, primum Antiochiae—nam ibi natus est loco nobili—celebri quondam urbe et copiosa, atque eruditissimis hominibus liberalissimisque studiis adfluenti, celeriter antecellere omnibus ingeni gloria contigit.” “M. Tulli Ciceronis Pro A. Licinio Archia Poeta Oratio” para. 4

<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/cicero/arch.shtml>

⁵ See the Latin Word Study Tool at:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=humanitas&la=la#lexicon>

⁶ They go on to specify that *liberalis* can mean: “*gentlemanly, noble, noble-minded, honorable, ingenuous, gracious, kind*” See the Latin Word Study Tool at:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=studium&la=la#lexicon>

such an education would produce a kind of cultivation and refinement, eminently worth having.

We are naturally suspicious these days of these ways of marking distinction, because they refer to the contrast between the freemen and slaves, between gentlemen and what Hazlitt might have called “the lower orders.” So if, as Pierre Bourdieu argued, the function of humane or literary cultivation were just to mark us off from the vulgar, then the humanities, conceived this way, would aim at an undemocratic end, I—like you, I imagine—couldn’t endorse it⁷

But Bourdieu’s thesis is not something I am even slightly inclined to accept. That a humane education can permit you to show off, I don’t want to deny. So can long practice at golf, but that’s hardly the best argument against golfing. The reason that I have no difficulty in defending the idea of the humanities as an education for free people is that one of the great achievements of the modern world has been to establish a global consensus that we ought all to be free. In that sense—the central dogma of liberalism—that individuals are all entitled to lives of their own, lives in which the central, shaping decisions are not to be settled for them by a master, is increasingly the common property of the species. If you

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

doubt me, you have only to listen to the voices on the streets of Cairo, of Tunis, of Damascus and Sana'a; or read the impassioned essays of Liu Xiaobo. And if you are to discharge the terrific responsibility of making a life of your own, then you surely need all the help you can get.

So why does an education in the humanities—an education *ad humanitatem*—provide part of the help you need? After all, you might think that the necessary answers are to be found from the sciences. Psychology and neuroscience tell me what it takes for a normal person to achieve satisfaction; economics and political science help you think about the effects of public policies; physics and chemistry and biology tell us how the world works, so that we can take what we want from it. All that is true.

But who is going to tell you what satisfactions are really worth having? Which effects worth aiming for? What is worth wanting? Who will help you decide whether John Stuart Mill was right to say “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied”? Indeed, who will let you know this question is worth asking? And where will you learn that one reason for studying the sciences is that understanding how the universe works is worthwhile in itself, even if we never put the knowledge to use in making a buck?

The answer, I think, is evident. These are the questions you learn to face, learn to live with, learn, in the end, provisionally at least, to answer, with the help of literature and the arts, critically appreciated, through the study of philosophy, and history and cultural anthropology. I realize that I sound like Polonius rabbiting platitudinously on ... and you may feel, like Laertes, that the proper response is humbly to take your leave, especially since I am not your father. So let me make what I hope is a less familiar point. The humanities are not just different from the sciences in providing us with a different kind of guidance in the making of our lives. They are different also, in several profound ways, in the character of their aims.

Here are three such crucial distinctions.

First, while generalizations—the great vowel shift from Anglo-Saxon to Middle English, say—have been discovered in the humanities, they are put to use in our studies in order to illuminate particular things: the universal in the humanities is in the service of the particular, to offer a formula. And this is, of course, because of the deeply idiographic character of much humanistic work: a particular poem, a particular painting, a particular symphony. Each is a worthy object of study, not just because it reveals something about art or the human spirit, but because it is itself worth explicating. Natural scientists are not interested in individual things—this

organism, this molecule—but in what they instantiate. They are driven by the nomothetic urge: the urge to discover general patterns. That is why Darwin's *Origin of Species* repays our attention, even though it is not longer by any stretch of the imagination the best scientific account of its subject.

This contrast between our idiographic interests and the nomothetic urges of the sciences is connected with a second contrast, which has to do with the *point* of attention to those particulars that concern us. One central humanistic aim is to explicate those particulars. Narrative as a form of exegesis is one form of explication: we tell the story that explains the meaning. But explication has many other modes. We can place a sign within a system of rules: prosodic and other formal rules, semantic rules, and the like. But not any explication of any humanly made thing is central to the project of the humanities. There are too many particulars to be interested in all of them. We pick among them. And—this is my third difference—we pick the ones that are significant for certain kinds of human purposes.

Human purposes evolve and cannot be catalogued in advance. *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*. But whereas one *E. coli* will do as well as another for biological study not any old pot or painting or verse is worthy of sustained attention. There's an answer to the question why there are more essays on Rembrandt's paintings than on

Ruysdael's (accomplished as the latter no doubt was); a reason why Mozart's works have received more attention than Salieri's; a significance to the greater attention paid to Jane Austin than to Wilkie Collins.

The work of the humanist requires the complex evaluations that underlie these differentiated patterns of attention. Hazlitt's recognition that the arts were not progressive is right, I believe; but not because the arts are not "reducible to rule." What he was noticing rather was the fact that among the particulars worthy of our present attention, among the objects worth passing on, are many from remote times; while the scientific theory of remote times is of no contemporary scientific interest. And that is an important truth. But, of course, ancient science can be an object of humanistic study, because we are interested in those ancient theories in the way in which we are interested in ancient art and ancient literature: because an understanding of them enriches us now, though the theories no longer hold our attention as guides to the nature of reality. That is why Darwin and Freud are of continuing humanistic interest.

Our practice presupposes that it is worth passing on an understanding of the intellectual, literary and artistic practices of our predecessors, even when their theories have been shown to be scientifically untenable, even when we have no interest in reproducing their arts or their poems. We pass

them on because without this knowledge the objects worth attending to are not intelligible, cannot be explicated, absorbed, responded to, in the ways that matter. It is a wonderful thing to be able to communicate the power, intelligence and pathos of a Horatian ode—including the pathos of the fact that he was right when he wrote “Exegi monumentum aere perennius,” for the bronze memorials of his day are indeed few and far between and yet we still have every one of his *Carmina*—even though the writing of a new Ode in his style would be a mere curiosity.

So, unlike the nomothetes, we will always be holding onto the past, because we hold the faith not just that much of what was done in the past is worth understanding for its own sake, but that because it is worth understanding, it is worth passing on.

Ethics teaches us that a worthwhile life has to contain things worth doing; but that one thing worth doing is attending to these artifacts is a lesson learned by anyone who has been well taught in the humanities. And the humanities are intrinsically connected with teaching. Our study of them is connected with the need to understand them; but the need to understand them depends on the conviction that they are worth holding on to and passing on.

Science does two kinds of work for us: it delivers understanding and it allows us technological progress. The

understanding it offers is, like humanistic understanding, a thing of intrinsic value. Of course the humanities have utilitarian benefits, too: well-trained English literature majors write better memos and movie scripts than most badly-trained ones; and certainly than those who have not learned to read deeply and well. But the rest of what we humanists do lives or dies—unlike the work of the sciences—by whether we communicate what we do to each generation of students, persuading them that these particulars whose understanding we profess are worthy objects of their contemporary attention. Some of the music and movies and television of our own era is worth attending to, of course. And much contemporary culture does, indeed, draw out humanistic attention in exactly the way that an ode of Horace, or a T'ang poem, or a chorale by Purcell, might do. But it is harder to persuade many students of the virtues of these older objects. And my own view, as I hope I have made plain, is that persuading them of this is an essential part of the vocation of the humanist. We must speak to non-specialists because we must speak to the untrained young. And, if our faith is warranted, then what we have to offer them is something to take on into their lives beyond college.

I am all for new methods. But they are in the service of a mission as old as Plato's Academy: to provide each new generation with the frameworks of understanding that will

allow them to interpret a significant number of the many particulars that are our human heritage.

That significant number is, as a moment's reflection reminds us, a diminishing proportion of what there is to explicate. When the scriptorium was replaced by the printing press, one of the limiting steps in the proliferation of writing was almost removed; when the Internet became available the barriers came down completely. Now, each week here in Washington, thousands of times the number of pages that anyone could read in a lifetime are printed on paper; millions of times that number on the web. Once, to hear the range of music that I can scan in a few minutes on my car radio, I would have had to have traveled thousands of miles and been lucky to arrive for the right performances. The DVDs in my own house contain more hours of human acting than Pepys or Aubrey—devoted theater-goers both—ever saw in their entire lives. We are, in short, drowning in the particulars we humanists study. Surely, now, in such a time, it is more urgent than ever to speak for what is finest in this great flood of artifacts, so that those whom we can persuade to care for the magnificent particulars will spend the little time each of us has to attend to them well. In this time, more than in any earlier time, the civilization we live in needs the work of the humanist. If the evidence is, increasingly, that our fellow citizens doubt this, that is our fault, not theirs: for responding

to this need is our vocation and our task.

There are extraordinary new tools for that project available to us now. When I sat down to write this talk, I had P. P. Howe's edition of the works of Hazlitt to hand, because it is part of our library at home; you, however, do not need to acquire this rare commodity because most of Hazlitt is somewhere on the web. And I could check on the Latin prose and verse that I half remember from my youth because of the Perseus website, from which I got not just the texts but also the dictionaries and the cross-references for thinking about them. We have so much more to read, yes; but we also have—and we need to develop—more tools for finding things to read—more, in the jargon, meta-data—that helps us scan the gigabytes for the kilobyte we need now.

Of course, we need a still richer store of materials in other traditions—more texts in Africa's hundreds of languages, for example along with the dictionaries and grammars for those who do not speak them to begin to make sense of them. But if you wanted to know why they should be there, I would direct you to one of the *sententiae* left to us from the plays of Terence, P. Terentius Afer, the Roman comedian of North African ancestry: a line that Montaigne helped make famous later by inscribing it on the beams of his study. *Homo sum, humani a me nihil alienum puto*. It doesn't matter that in the *Self-Tormentor*, from which it comes, this line

is actually a high-minded defense of snooping on your neighbor; decontextualized, it has become one of the great cosmopolitan slogans of humanism. And when I started thinking about the ethical significance of our now ever-more-global society some years ago, it was an even older figure—Diogenes of Sinope—who set me on the way.

But it's the particulars that are our distinctive contribution. So let me end by exemplifying their power in a writer I just mentioned, namely Michel de Montaigne. Liberalism has at its heart the idea of the free man and woman. What matters, to put it the other way round, is *not* being unfree, *not* living like a slave. (That is one reason why works like the *Autobiography of Fredrick Douglass* are crucial reading for an educated person.) One dimension of freedom is being in charge of the making of your own life: in the spirit of John Stuart Mill, we could call that individuality. The individual is not a slave to a master, but also not slave to a government and not a slave to public opinion. Mill worried that “the opinions of masses of merely average men are everywhere ... becoming the dominant power...” and he wanted us to resist the tyranny of public opinion. So liberalism has both the doctrine that all people should be free, and an interpretation of what freedom is and why it matters.

But it also has, at its core, some dispositions, some habits of mind, and principally these two: an abhorrence of cruelty and a sense of the provisional nature of human knowledge. And these tendencies of thought are everywhere evident in Montaigne's sensibility. To see how distinctive he was, it helps to recall the times. Religious strife raged in France throughout his adult his life, including the infamous Massacre of St. Bartholomew, when perhaps tens of thousands—no one knows exactly how many—were massacred in Paris and the provinces. Montaigne was urging toleration at a time when you could be burned at the stake for an error in theology. "It's putting one's conjectures at a rather high price, to burn a man alive for them," he observed wryly ... taking aim, in a single shot, at overconfidence and at cruelty, which he termed the "ultimate of the vices."

Montaigne's response to cruelty was visceral before it was theoretical. For all his vaunted egoism, he had a gift for imaginative empathy; for putting himself in the shoes of another man. He also had a gift for accepting that his guesses were merely guesses. People often say that Montaigne and Descartes are the first modern philosophical skeptics. But in Montaigne skepticism isn't a thesis; it is an attitude. If you wanted to label the position, you could say that Montaigne is a fallibilist. He believes we must always bear in mind our own endless capacity for error. Discussing the long-standing

debates between geocentric and heliocentric astronomy, he writes, in a characteristic moment, “Who knows but that a third opinion, a thousand years from now, may overthrow the two former?” (Of course, a third view—that motion is always relative to a frame—did indeed show up, and sooner than Montaigne supposed.)

These aspects of Montaigne’s temperament—his resistance to cruelty and his fallibilism—are ones from which we can still learn. They are liberal because they are part of the temperamental equipment of a free man, who aims to live at peace among a free people. You learn them from an education *ad humanitatem*. We learn these things well from Montaigne because he coaxes—I would almost say, seduces—us into his vision. The particulars of the *Essays* are worth attending to in their own right, I say: but that is not to deny, as I have also insisted, that coming to know them has many other advantages. And these powerful lessons about the best way for men and women to live together as free people are among the benefits. But the reasons why the particulars are worth attending to, and the consequential benefits of that attention, are not just one, they are many. That is why the case for the humanities is not one- but many-stranded; and why it is learned best through doing what we do, attending to some of the many things we claim demand our attention.