

The Humanities under Siege?

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It is a commonplace, especially so in Anglo-American academe, that the humanities are in crisis. In a recent issue of *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, dedicated to gauging the situation of the humanities in the United States, Edward L. Ayers gives a brief sketch of this permanent crisis (Ayers 2009), referring in passing to book-length studies by J. H. Plumb (1964), articles by Roger Geiger (2006), as well as a special 2005 issue of *New Literary History*. Today, however, the humanities are truly under siege, and nowhere more so than in Europe, their supposed original “home.” This is especially true for the more narrow definition of “the humanities” usually given to this term in English, and which roughly corresponds with what in Anglo-American universities is offered in a Faculty of Arts, i.e. the study of history, the arts proper, and languages and literatures. The closest German translation, “Geisteswissenschaften,” covers a slightly larger set of disciplines, including philosophy and theology. The French “humanités” stretches into “les sciences de l’homme,” and includes disciplines such as political science, economics, law, and geography. Even within the Arts, though, some areas fare better than others, or, perhaps more accurately, they do less bad. I am thinking here specifically of History, Linguistics, and such hybrids as Area Studies. The reasons for why what is “left,” then, which is to say the language and literature departments in the classical sense of the term, are doing badly are multiple.

To begin with, over the last twenty-five years or so student numbers in language and literature departments have kept falling, at least in certain countries. In the US, the relative part of language and literature studies in the overall number of students has dropped sharply, even though absolute numbers have stayed roughly equal. The number of students registered in the twelve leading modern languages is rising for each language, but seen over time, the numbers relate a different story: although there is growth in absolute numbers of enrollments in modern languages, because of the phenomenal expansion of students attending institutions of higher learning, in 2006 enrollments in the most taught languages have not reached the proportion they reached in 1960–65. Since the high of 1960–65, enrollments in languages have fallen substantially in proportion to the expanding number of students attending institutions of higher education. Thus describing trends only in terms of increasing enrollments does not convey the magnitude of some of these changes (see Furman,

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Goldberg, and Lusin 2007: 3–4). But I am also thinking of Western Europe where, for instance, the Netherlands have seen a dramatic drop in student enrollment in language and literature departments, especially so since the continent-wide (or almost) introduction of the BA-MA model following the implementation of the so-called Bologna agreement of the late 1990s. In Leiden, the reduction of incoming first-year students was as follows for the period 1992 to 2001: Spanish 70%, French 68%, Slavics 68%, German 61%, Romance 49%, Italian 47%, Dutch 41%, English 39%. All Dutch Faculties of Arts lost 34.6% in student numbers. The figures for the major Dutch universities look as follows: Utrecht 51%, UvA 50%, Leiden 37.5%, Groningen 28%, Nijmegen 20.5 % (Forum, 2002).

If not immediately so, then certainly so in the somewhat longer run – say a period of 3 to 5 years – these trends lead to staff reductions logically and mathematically brought about by student/staff ratios. Moreover, student/staff ratios, where they are being used as a basis for recruitment of staff at all (which is not the case everywhere; for instance in Belgium staff are appointed to teach certain courses regardless of the number of students in them, which leads on the one hand to courses with almost no students, and on the other hand to hugely oversubscribed courses), are often “adjusted” on the basis of the financial position in which a particular university, or a particular country, finds itself.

The Modern Language Association has been tracking job openings in modern languages in the US since the mid-1970s, and finds a clear correlation between fluctuations in the job market concerned and the cycles affecting the US, and the world, economy. Not surprisingly, the most recent crisis has had a most depressing effect. The financial crisis of 2008 made its consequences painfully evident in the 2008–09 *MLA Job Information List (JIL)*. After trending upward between 2003–04 and 2007–08, the number of jobs advertised in the *JIL* in 2008–09 has declined since 2007–08 by 446 (24.4%) in English and 453 (27.0%) in foreign languages. In the English edition 1,202 ads announced 1,380 jobs; in the foreign language edition 1,106 ads announced 1,227 jobs (ads that departments later marked “search canceled” have been excluded from these counts). In both numerical and percentage terms, this year’s declines mark the largest single-year decreases in the thirty-four-year history of the *JIL* counts (MLA, 2009).

Quite logically again, such reductions in first instance affect temporary staff, usually younger or at least more recent PhDs, whose contracts are not renewed. In the long run it affects permanent staff numbers, when tenured staff retire and are not replaced. Even if absolute student numbers do not decline dramatically, but instead rise modestly (even if still lagging behind in relative terms when compared to the total number of students), as they did in the US between 1995 and 2005, reductions lead to a decisive shift between tenured and non-tenured faculty, with the former decreasing in proportion to the latter. The MLA/ADE report *Demography of the Faculty: A Statistical Portrait of English and Foreign Languages* (Laurence 2008) states that the

percentage figures show a dramatic ten-percentage-point decline in the share of the faculty represented by tenured and tenure-track appointments. The numbers tell us that, across higher education considered as a whole, the percentage drop in tenured and tenure-track appointments occurred because of increases in the non-tenure-track categories rather than cuts in the absolute number of tenured or tenure-track positions. (The IPEDS data, of course, tell us nothing about transfers of lines between disciplines, and an aggregate summary masks the varying circumstances of specific institutions or sectors.) The ADE report on the academic workforce also calls attention to the continuing increases in student enrollments since 1975 and particularly from 1995 to 2005 (fig. 3). As student enrollments grow, the part of the faculty teaching off the tenure track grows a lot, while the tenured and tenure-track faculty ranks stay roughly the same size. The tenured faculty becomes diminished in the institution by being overwhelmed rather than by being cut. (Laurence 2008: 1)

In other words, the prospect of a tenured position increasingly vanishes for a younger generation of PhD holders. Even in countries where the student numbers in language and literature departments are holding up rather well, as is the case in for instance Belgium, staff is being reduced by economizing on temporarily employed academics, mostly assistant professors and research positions, or by cutting out entire categories, such as for instance the “teaching assistants” (roughly comparable to the American category of the same name, comprising PhD students on their way to obtaining their degree).

Secondly, public financing for teaching and research in language and literature disciplines is continuously dwindling. Harriet Zuckerman and Ronald Ehrenberg, in their contribution to the *Daedalus* issue already mentioned, “Recent Trends in Funding for the Academic Humanities and their Implications,” compare how much the government, foundations, and private donors provide for the humanities with the estimates John D’Arms made in his contribution to the volume *What’s Happened to the Humanities?*, edited by Alvin Kernan (D’Arms 1997), and with what universities and colleges themselves invest in the humanities. With the “academic humanities” Zuckerman and Ehrenberg mean “‘all fields of study normally grouped together . . . that are identified as departments and programs in humanities, and in which the Ph.D. is the highest earned degree.’ They also include history (sometimes classified with the social sciences) and aspects of anthropology, ethnology, and archaeology” (p. 124). (In another article in the same *Daedalus* issue Edward L. Ayers defines the humanities as “generally considered to include English language and literature; foreign languages and literatures; history; philosophy; religion; ethnic, gender, and cultural studies; area and interdisciplinary studies; archaeology; art history; the history of music; and the study of drama and cinema. Some parts of political science, government, geography, anthropology, and sociology – the ‘humanistic social sciences’ – are more closely identified with the humanities than with other more quantitative aspects of the disciplines.”) Zuckerman and Ehrenberg also pay attention to the difference between public and private universities in this regard. Their conclusions are that, at least in the United States, the cost of research in the humanities over the last decades has shifted from government and foundation funding to universities and colleges themselves, that within these universities and colleges, but particularly in universities, the share of funds spent on the humanities, in terms of salaries to teaching staff, research funding, and library investment, is decreasing, and that in general private universities continue to do better on all fronts than do public institutions.

In Europe, of course, university teaching and research are almost exclusively the province of government funding. In some countries, such as Denmark, reductions in allocations to humanities teaching and research form part of the more general reduction in the budget for higher education and research under the present government. In other countries it is simply becoming more and more difficult for language and literature scholars to secure funding because of choices made by governments, or in some cases, university authorities. In my own university, for instance, all allocations to individual staff members qua staff member, i.e. as part of a regular university appointment, were done away with and replaced by a system where each euro of research money, and hence also every minute of research time, has to be earned in competition with all other researchers in the university. As the needs, and the returns, of other disciplines, especially in medicine, applied sciences, engineering, etc. are deemed far greater than those of the humanities, and of language and literature research in particular, the net result of such a policy can easily be imagined. The same goes for supra-national funding agencies, such as those run by, dependent upon, or in some way linked to the European Union. The EU FP7 (Framework Program), for instance, has 6 over-arching program categories: COOP, People, Ideas, Capacities, Joint Technology Initiatives, and Public-Private Partnerships. In COOP there are 10 sub-categories for which “Calls” are

issued, and for which research proposals can be submitted. Of these 10 only one makes mention of the humanities, and this is in a joint category with the socio-economic sciences. Under the "Ideas" program there are 4 categories, each of them providing ERC (European Research Council) grants, one of these comprising "Starting" grants, typically reserved for younger researchers, and the other being "Advanced" grants, in the physical sciences and engineering, the life sciences, and – again – the socio-economic sciences and the humanities jointly. The "Joint Technology Initiatives" and the "Public-Private Partnerships" make no mention of the humanities. The last two programs, "People" and "Capacities," respectively, in theory offer possibilities for researchers regardless of field or discipline. The terms ruling these programs, however, make it difficult for humanities scholars, particularly in language and literature, to qualify. Much the same goes for the research programs run by the ESF (European Science Foundation), which in its major "Eurocores" program involving collaborative research projects has no room for the humanities, and for COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology), which in only one of its 9 key domains, viz. "Individuals, Societies, Cultures and Health," specifically appeals to the humanities, again along with a jumble of other disciplines, with the other 8 domains accommodating, respectively, "Biomedicine and Molecular Biosciences," "Food and Agriculture," "Forests, their Products and Services," "Materials, Physical and Nanosciences," "Chemistry and Molecular Sciences and Technology," "Earth System Science and Environmental Management," "Information and Communication Technologies, and "Transport and Urban Development," respectively.

I now should refine a little on what I have been saying until now. Some kinds of language study and teaching are not doing badly at all. Linguistics, for instance, while certainly not more successful than for instance Literature in attracting students especially at the advanced level, MA or beyond, is considerably more successful in securing government and other funding. Especially in its more theoretical versions it is obviously appreciated as being more "scientific" than other forms of language study. Thus, linguistics can to a much greater extent than literature benefit from the general shift in academic research from immediate staff- or teacher-related research, the so-called first subvention stream whereby each staff member is allotted a certain amount of research time, if not necessarily material funding, towards project-based research, the so-called "second" subvention stream. Moreover, especially at the computational end of the spectrum, linguistics can also benefit from the so-called "third" stream, i.e. contract research. At the opposite end, the perception that language acquisition or training as an end in itself is considered more "useful" than the acquisition of a language according to a classical academic language and literature curriculum in many places leads to the splitting off of the language training component from traditional language and literature departments, and to the creation of language-service centers, often also (perhaps even preferably, because more profitable) catering to outside customers, or even generating revenue from tendering their services within the university itself to those language and literature departments whence they originated.

In many countries, especially non-EU or non-US, but also in a number of European countries, we also witness the creation of new and privately-funded institutions, universities or equivalent, that offer languages only, or primarily, as ancillaries to courses in e.g. business, human relations, or some other more profitable curriculum. The result is a proliferation of English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses with, as their only aim, academic or research interest improving upon their own pedagogy. Not surprisingly, it is English in particular that is dominant in all of this, with some other widely-used languages, depending on region and proximity, or shifting perceptions of the relative importance in economic and geo-political terms of certain countries, distant seconds. For instance, Koç University, in Istanbul, a private non-profit institution founded in 1933 with the

support of a wealthy Turkish businessman, and devoted to excellence in research and teaching, offers mainly Business, Science, and engineering courses, but in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities also offers a BA in English and Comparative Literature with four options: World Literature and Humanities; Literatures in English; Turkish and Ottoman Literature; and Film and Visual Culture. The rationale of the BA is described as follows: “With its broad and adaptable approach, the English Language and Comparative Literature major provides excellent preparation for students who wish to pursue literary study in a postgraduate setting. The major also provides excellent training for Koç students who seek success in the private sectors of an information economy, where critical language skills grow increasingly valuable” (http://www.ku.edu.tr/ku/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2080&Itemid=2973). The City University of Hong Kong is another relevant example. All across the Southern tier of Europe mostly private universities are springing up that see language teaching as providing its graduates in all kinds of really useful disciplines with a necessary skill, devoid of any scientific or scholarly interest. If language is taught as an end in itself, this happens more and more in practical curricula offered at what in England, and in English terminology, until fairly recently would have been called polytechnics, but which since Mrs Thatcher’s reforms of the 1980s are now all universities. As most of Europe has followed the UK’s lead the dividing line between the academic study of language, combined with the study of literature, and the practical acquisition of language for non-academic purposes has blurred to the point of erasure. Moreover, in much of continental Europe the division into a three-year BA and a one- or two-year MA cycle of what before was more often a four-year uniform course of studies, has tended to shift the more “academic” – read: the less practically-oriented – parts of language and literature curricula into the MA phase. Concretely, language and literature studies in the BA phase now often tend to concentrate on language acquisition, almost on a par with the traditionally always more practice-oriented curricula of the (former) polytechnics, with the study of literature and linguistics in its more demanding guise left for the MA phase. The result is that the room for literature teaching at the BA level largely becomes a matter of repetitive survey courses. As the study of literature, given the situation just sketched, offers fewer and fewer possibilities for an economically productive career, it is to be feared that certainly in the longer run, there will be few takers for advanced courses in the subject, with further reductions in staff time allocation, staff numbers, research money, etc. as a corollary. Linguistics in the long run may have even fewer takers but as I argued before it can draw on more liberal funding, compensating for its lack of students.

From the foregoing it will be clear that within the humanities, and within language and literature studies, it is especially the literature component that is hurting. The reduction in staff, as well as the lack of research funding, combined with the popular perception, supported by government campaigns, such as that in Holland in the 1990s for (even high school) students to “choose exact,” i.e. for the exact sciences, and their corollaries or derivatives, that the humanities do not lead to gainful employment, and that therefore pursuing advanced studies, such as an MA, in the humanities, and a fortiori in literature, is unproductive, have a number of dire consequences. To begin with, as mentioned already, literary scholars teaching at university are more and more limited to teaching, year-in year-out, massive survey courses at the BA level. Even at the MA level especially the courses in the more popular – or simply, in an age of increasing student mobility, for evident reasons more accessible – literatures, such as English, are flooded with students, to the point where even so-called “seminars,” supposedly calling for intensive student-teacher interaction, with a significant degree of independent research to be undertaken by the students and discussed in class, turn into lecture courses. At my own university, for example, it is not unusual for courses in English or American literature to have eighty, ninety, or more students in MA

seminars. Then, given chronic understaffing, as well as the need to reach a minimum critical mass for literatures other than English, it is becoming more and more common to combine students of various literatures in one joint course, which is then taught in either the national language of the country in question, or, increasingly, in English. Most of the material in such courses is then read in translation. Now, not all of this is necessarily bad: students in such courses may, even if inadvertently and unintentionally, *faute de mieux*, so to speak, get a broader picture, from a “European” or a “world” perspective, and that is to be applauded. Yet, such courses should function as a supplement to courses in national literatures, taught in the relevant foreign language, not as their forced replacement. The unfortunate result of all this is a lack of breadth, depth, and scope in the teaching of literature at the academic level, and in the longer run also in literary research, especially in countries, such as the Netherlands, or Belgium, that, unlike France with its CNRS, or Norway, with its Centers of Excellence, have no dedicated research facilities or centers. No wonder then that also for literary studies our best students increasingly look towards the United States and its top graduate schools for a proper scholarly training with sufficiently specialized teaching and research facilities. If we are honest in having their best interests uppermost in our minds, we should even encourage them in this. Nor are the US the only destination; increasingly also Australia and New Zealand, and soon China and other Asian countries, emerge as more than competitive with Europe even when it comes to graduate studies in European literatures.

Beyond the obvious threat to those of us “professing” literature, what are the implications of these developments? To begin with, a critical European heritage risks being lost, precisely in the “human” or “humanist” tradition traditionally associated with the study of literature and which has its roots in Europe, but also in the sense of “cultural heritage” as the “historical imaginary” of Europe. At the very least, this imaginary risks being distorted in its appropriation by Europe’s “Others,” thereby reversing the Eurocentrism for which the Old Continent has so often been blamed, and Europe turning itself into the object of the Others’ gaze by relinquishing its own grip upon its own cultural, in this case literary, heritage. Perhaps this is in fact the destiny of Europe if we go along with Rodolphe Gasché’s argument in his *Europe, or the Unfinished Task* (Gasché 2009) that the philosophical task of Europe is to dissolve itself by turning its own bedrock principle of universalism into the world’s property, with “Europe” thus de-exceptionalizing itself.

In many ways what is happening to the study of literature in the modern university now is similar to what happened to the study of the classics a century ago. The study of the classics was an indispensable part of the humanist culture and education that came into being during Early Modernity, and that was passed on almost unchanged until the nineteenth century, when under the influence of Cardinal Newman it was enshrined as the very touchstone of a university education. Even at the time of Newman’s writing, though, Matthew Arnold was advocating the virtues of at least supplementing the classics with the study of more modern literatures, first and foremost English literature, especially for the education of the less privileged classes in society. Gradually, over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the study of the European, and specifically the West European, modern languages and literatures came to replace that of the classics as the basis of a proper “liberal” education. Concomitantly, the importance, if not the prestige, of classical learning shrunk, with as a corollary the reduction in staff, etc. of classics departments. In many universities the classics even disappeared as a viable discipline. In the second half of the twentieth century a comparable shift occurred with the change from philology, for a long time the dominant form of modern language and literature study, and explicitly modeled upon the study of the classics, to criticism, and then “theory,” as the leading approaches in language and literature studies. The change was heralded by the advent of New Criticism in the US, and Leavisite criticism in the UK, and in the 60 years since World War II, has led to the

fast-changing succession of Structuralism, Deconstruction, New Historicism, Postcolonialism, etc. In a parallel movement, the study of modern literatures these days is being replaced by the study of yet more modern, and perhaps more relevant, in any case more popular media, be it film, television, video, DVD, or the internet, and most recently blogging. In essence, what these media offer, and the way they do it, is equivalent to what constituted “popular” culture in the mid-nineteenth century: the fiction of Charles Dickens and his peers, whom we now look upon as the “classics” of English fiction, and therefore as part of that “high” culture we think deserves defending. The near, or in any case the somewhat more distant, future for the study of modern languages and literatures then shapes up much like the recent past of the study of the classics: it will retire to a small corner of academe, a prestigious corner no doubt, but also a corner that is indulged for its former importance and centrality, a sort of luxury in a world geared to other values, other interests. It will in fact become a sort of “reservation” of a world and a species gone by ... a token or reminder of a historical situation.

After all, societies, in the form of the governments they choose themselves, or by which they let themselves be ruled, make choices as to what they want to invest their wealth in, and the study of literature is not among them these days. (See the bitterly ironic but also incisive article “Impact on Humanities” in the *TLS* of 13 November 2009 by Stefan Collini on the new English system of funding research at British universities no longer solely on the “measurable output,” in terms of publications, etc., of their scientists and scholars, but rather, and this to a significant extent, on the “impact” of their research, where that “impact” is primarily defined in terms of economic benefit.) As Western societies are increasingly challenged by ongoing globalization to become ever more efficient and productive, they will be more and more pressed to “cut the slack” or “trim the fat,” and it just might be that the study of literature falls into these categories. As Zuckerman and Ehrenburg note, “foundation spending is now increasingly directed toward initiatives solving ‘real world problems’ and on activities having measurable social and economic impact, with the result that the humanities are likely to receive less attention than they once did,” (p. 130) and “the benefits the academic humanities confer on society are not understood well enough, by a sufficient number, to justify the belief that much better days are ahead” (p. 146).

Should this trend continue, though, and the study of literature fade into near-oblivion, this would be a pity, and not just because of the obviously self-serving jeremiad for the academic profession I am mounting here. There are in fact good reasons for keeping the study of literature alive and healthy. To begin with, European literature, as part of European culture, is a marketable commodity, not only inside of Europe, but likewise to outsiders. To develop this potential, though, requires investing in its study, upgrading the latter rather than allowing it to suffer a crippling downslide. Concretely, this requires investing in adequate staffing for MA and PhD programs in the subject, so as to attract not only the better European candidates but also those coming from the fast-expanding economies in Asia and Latin America. BRIC could become a significant acronym not just for the “pure” economics of an increasingly globalizing world of consumer goods and services, but also for the likewise ever more mobile world of international academe.

Most European countries are struggling to reduce the burden of mass education by cutting back on public funding while at the same time increasing the input of private funding. The United Kingdom, where tuition has gone up steeply over the past decade, and the Netherlands, where at the very moment of writing this piece students at a number of universities are occupying and blockading buildings in protest against the government’s plans to significantly reduce spending on higher education as of 2011, are cases in point. Such measures risk reversing the trend toward democratization of higher education which in most European countries has been an avowed goal for at least the last sixty years or so, thus leading to an actual impoverishment, in terms of

potential talent brought to actual fruition, of the societies in question. For reasons adduced above, these measures are also poised to hit the humanities, and within the humanities the language and literature studies, particularly hard. Yet, the humanities, and language and literature studies, are among the disciplines that actually demand the least little bit of extra investment to yield significant returns. Unlike many other disciplines in the exact and applied sciences, or in medicine, the humanities do not require ever more expensive laboratories or machines. Their basic working capital consists of the libraries that in most European universities, and certainly the older ones among them, have been built up over the generations, the past centuries. Beyond this it only requires a modest investment in digital access facilities, and in people, to dramatically enhance their potential.

Now, the humanities, and first and foremost among them language and literature studies, because of their relatively low threshold of entry, have always been one of the highroads towards democratization and toward spreading mass higher education, especially so for students from less privileged milieus. As such they have contributed also to the social and economic advancement of the lower tiers of Western society. It would be a pity to squander this potential. But at least as important is the fact that the humanities, and language and literature studies, can also draw paying customers from beyond Europe, thus offsetting at least part of the extra outlay required to keep, or bring, advanced degree teaching and research in the relevant disciplines up to the truly international level. If Europe wants to make good on the Lisbon strategy – or its successor – goal of making Europe into the most knowledge-intensive society in the world, then at least in the humanities this can be done with relatively little investment as most of the indispensable capital, in the form of Europe's priceless libraries and cultural institutions, is already right there; it only needs activating. In other words, university teaching and research in the humanities, and in language and literature studies, should be thought of as at least complementary with, perhaps even part of, the "cultural industries" that recent studies have shown to occupy an ever greater role in Western economies.

Fortunately, some governments and organizations have come to recognize the perilous situation in which the humanities find themselves. The Netherlands, for instance, has announced that its National Science Foundation (NWO) has put aside an increased budget for humanities research in the near future. Following the publication of a national report (see *Duurzame Geesteswetenschappen* 2008), NWO announced that it would step up funding for PhD research in the humanities to the amount of 17,000,000 euro over 5 years (see NWO press announcement 2009). The Academia Europaea, which for a number of years has had a working group on Higher Education and Culture in European Society (HERCULES), is also putting together a working group on the humanities. (For some of the most recent results of HERCULES see *The European Review* 18.2 Supplement 2010 on "Diversification of Higher Education and the Academic Profession.") As a preliminary consideration, the AE is tending towards the opinion that a number of relevant issues, such as for instance the threat under which a number of highly specialized humanities disciplines are (e.g. paleography) across Europe, should be addressed no longer at the national but rather at the European level, via multilateral agreements between governments to at least keep such disciplines alive in one or two institutions. In a sense, the fact that under the EU's FP6 and FP7 the humanities have been included, albeit thrown together with the social sciences (and which in my experience get by far the lion's share of the funds available), whereas in earlier FPs this was not the case, is another recognition of the precarious position of the humanities, and of the need to take at least some measures toward keeping them alive. Unfortunately, in Europe we do not have at our disposal a comprehensive instrument such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' "Humanities Indicators," which Patricia Meyer Spacks and Leslie Berlowitz,

in their introduction to the *Daedalus* issue mentioned before, describe as “an online resource containing seventy-four indicators and over two hundred graphs and charts tracking trends in five areas: primary and secondary education; undergraduate and graduate education; the humanities workforce; humanities research and funding; and the humanities in American life” (Spacks and Berlowitz 2009: 5–7). Perhaps this is something to emulate, by the Academia Europaea, a European Commission Directorate, or some such organization as the European Science foundation, as a first step toward properly diagnosing, and then remedying, the condition of the humanities in Europe.

Finally, what can the humanities, and in particular language and literature studies, do themselves to reverse, or at least, curb their decline? To begin with, it is necessary to insist that language and literature studies in their “original” dispensation served a particular purpose at a particular moment, as did the classics before them. And just as with the classics before, that historical moment and purpose have now passed. Therefore it makes little sense to insist on preserving or reviving the humanities, and especially language and literature studies, in their original form. Instead, the humanities, and particularly the study of literature, need to rethink their position from a functional approach: what are they for now, what purpose can they serve? What is their “competitive edge” or “advantage”? What should they teach? In which kind of research should they engage?

On a purely speculative and personal basis, I would say that instead of continuing to insist on the “unique” or “exceptional” status of literature and its concomitant “exalted” position in the cultural field, we should start to look at literature as a product among other products, as an economic as well as a cultural artifact, even perhaps a commodity. In other words, we should start situating literature in a continuum of media and means of communication, diachronically as well as synchronically. This implies increased attention to the history of the book, its production and circulation, its economics as part of the “culture industries.” Of course, such attention has been increasingly forthcoming over the last few years, with various studies by Roger Chartier, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Robert Darnton, Anthony Grafton, Alberto Manguel, and others, culminating in the Blackwell *Companion to the History of the Book* (Eliot and Rose eds 2009) and the two-volume *Oxford Companion to the Book* (Suarez and Woudhuysen eds 2010); notice also the establishment of, for instance, The Centre for the History of the Book at Edinburgh University in 1995.

Then, we have to accept that, just as the age of philology went out some fifty years ago, the age of theory has now also run its course. The unique attention given to “theory” from the 1950s through the early years of the twenty-first century was yet another historical stage in the relationship between literature and society. Instead, we would do better to turn to sciences such as sociology, economics, or even the life sciences, to find the appropriate concepts, instruments, or perhaps just metaphors, to study our subject with. (This is exactly what for instance Franco Moretti also advocates, and implements, in Moretti 2005.) In all this, though, there is a proper role for the humanities, and an important one to boot. We should always insist that the humanities, and literature among them, are in a unique position to reflect, from a perspective informed by the entire history of mankind’s feelings, emotions, and interests, on the position of man with regard to issues studied by all other sciences. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in a 2005 *NLH* article reflecting on “Beneath and Beyond the ‘Crisis in the Humanities’,” argued that

[o]ne of the most promising features of the present moment is the new urgency gathering at the interface of the humanistic and nonhumanistic disciplines as they confront not only such new subjects as genetic engineering, environmental trauma, and the cognitive capacities of animals or machines, but also, and

most intriguingly, such traditional subjects as the nature of language and the distinctive features of a specifically human being. None of the subjects can be satisfactorily addressed by a single discipline, but all of them concern fundamental issues relating to humanity; and the humanities, whose special province is questions of meaning, history, and value, must now reconceive themselves as the natural sponsor of the debates and controversies that swirl around such issues. The confrontations that result from these debates will, in a sense, threaten the disciplines that engage in them, for the sovereignty or adequacy of each will be called into question by the others. But the prospect of genuine advances in knowledge and of the rejuvenation of the disciplines that accompanies these advances more than compensates for this threat. (Harpham 2005: 35)

And Don Michael Randel, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, formerly president of the University of Chicago (2000–2006), and before that Dean and Provost at Cornell University, in the *Daedalus* issue mentioned before, puts it as follows:

By all means let us strengthen the teaching of, and research in, science and mathematics at all levels. But the study of what makes these undertakings truly worthwhile; the study of the values that support the production of knowledge and its proper application in society; the study of, contemplation of, and exploration of what it means to be a human being and why and how we should want to organize our lives in relation to one another around the globe: these are the domains of the humanities and the arts. ... Above all we need to talk and act as if we truly believe that the humanities and the arts matter and underlie the deepest foundations of a democratic society. Thinking about such things does not really cost much money; it requires making the space for them in our national life and then trying to live by what we find there, no matter the method or the size of our contribution to the gross domestic product.

In other words, instead of insisting on safeguarding literature apart from, or above, the world of everyday realities, and on that basis making claims for our own special position within academe, and society, we should aim to “sell” ourselves better, in both the figurative and the literal sense.

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