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“The Humanities without Apology”

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Thank you for inviting me to join the ongoing discussion at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln regarding the review and reform of its general education curriculum. This project is of critical importance to the humanities, not just because any effective general education program must include them, but equally because the humanities concern themselves with the whole range of human knowing.

This important subject is, of course, not a new one, but resurfaces each time colleges and universities recalibrate their operations in a changing world. As you are no doubt aware, your current reform echoes a similar effort undertaken here exactly a century ago. Nebraska faculty were concerned that the College of Literature, Science and the Arts was losing prominence and enrollment to the “Industrial College” and that young men, in particular, were forsaking the liberal arts for studies that seemed to promise immediate applicability.

The voices raised then echo today. One classics professor decried “a false ideal of culture; ... a crass utilitarianism which mistakes the means for the end. Can any education,” he asked “be regarded as adequate, and informed by the right ideal, which ignores the liberal arts, the priceless treasures gained during the countless ages of men’s spiritual and social evolution ... ? Professional studies [should] be relegated more and more to the post-graduate years; thus giving students a chance to acquire culture before they gain technical cunning; to become right-minded men and women and good citizens before becoming lawyers, electricians, or bridge-builders.”¹

Hand in hand with the call for a general preparation came the recognition of the importance of a deeper focus as well. Thus, Ellery W. Davis, dean of the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, concerned about an increasingly sprawling elective system, initiated reforms that included the requirement of selecting a major under the guidance of a faculty adviser. The aim was “to so teach as to make a permanent and lasting impression upon a student, to give him such a taste of thoro[ugh]ness that he shall ever after be dissatisfied with the incomplete and the vague, and distrustful of all half-knowledge.”²

But any comparison between 1905 and today must take into account the changed political economy of American higher education. One hundred years ago, the American university

1. George E. Howard, *University Journal*, March 1906, quoted in Robert N. Manley, *Centennial History of the University of Nebraska: I. Frontier University, 1869-1919* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1969) 162.

2. Robert N. Manley, *Centennial History of the University of Nebraska: I. Frontier University, 1869-1919* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1969) 163.

system was under energetic construction. Public investment was increasing as states competed to develop institutions that would compete with the private institutions endowed by wealthy individuals, such as Stanford University and the University of Chicago. In 1905, the *State Journal* newspaper advocated that the University of Nebraska raise faculty salaries in order to keep “strong men” on its faculties.³ Institutions of higher education were seen as a common good, not as a service purchased by individual consumers. In 2005, we see a declining public investment in higher education, with costs shifted to tuition-payers and to the faculty, principally the non-tenure track “contingent” faculty: adjuncts that make up an increasingly large fraction of our teaching force. This decline in public investment is accompanied, ironically but predictably, by increased demand for public accountability and sometimes captious government regulations. How long before policies and testing will seek to assure that there is “no undergraduate left behind”?

In this increasingly insalubrious climate, the areas of the academy with the weakest public rapport are likely to suffer the greatest loss. But these very changes in our environment require us to advocate all the more forcefully for academic values and practices in general, and to be prepared to make the case for the continuing importance of humanities scholarship, teaching, and research in particular.

Who will listen, and who has? This afternoon I will review three overlapping stages of making the case, each stage focused on a slightly different primary audience. The first was the effort to insert the humanities into the philanthropic system that helped create the modern American university. The foundations that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century embraced a self-conscious ideology of “scientific philanthropy,” based on a medical model of disease treatment, and it was not at all clear how the humanities fit that scientific model. “With the quick march of science,” wrote foundation officer Abraham Flexner, “philosophy and humanism have gone under a cloud; when they assert themselves, they are prone to do so apologetically, on the ground that they too are, or can be, scientific.”⁴

The second stage was the effort to make the humanities a part of the system of public support, an effort that culminated 40 years ago in the founding of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Here, too, the standard was set by the sciences: 20 years earlier, in 1945, Massachusetts Institute of Technology engineer Vannevar Bush had initiated the establishment of the National Science Foundation with an elegant and straightforward report, *Science: the Endless Frontier*, that has become the model for such advocacy pieces.

The third stage I want to touch upon is more recent: the efforts to survey the still-smoking battlefield left by the “culture wars” and secure the position of the humanities in higher education and the public sphere even as the university is transformed by demographic, economic and technological forces, the full impact of which we are just beginning to discern. One element of this effort is the Association of American Universities (AAU) Report, *Reinvigorating the Humanities*, about which campus roundtables and eventually, national, discussions are being promoted as a cooperative effort by the AAU and ACLS.

3. Manley 164.

4. Abraham Flexner, *Universities: American, English, German* (New York: Oxford UP, 1930) 20.

In each of these periods, three tropes have come into play, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes discordantly. Even while apologetically acknowledging that the humanities lagged behind science in practicality, advocates have made a case for the utility of humanistic learning. Advocates also have stressed the humanities as the area of the academy most concerned with meaning and value. The third and most charged theme has been the implicit and explicit argument for specialization and professional authority and their consequences for public understanding.

One can conceive of these arguments as a triple helix: the DNA of the public purpose of the public persona of the humanities. My hope is that by mapping these arguments and their various recombinations in different historical and policy contexts, we can better confront the heightened requirements of advocacy in the 21st century, in a policy climate much less congenial than that of a century ago.

So, first, the humanities and the early philanthropic foundations.⁵ As science and research modeled after science reshaped the American university, so did it influence the contours of scholarship outside of science. In surveying the history of humanistic inquiry and practice between 1890 and 1920, the historian Laurence Veysey remarked on their struggle for a precise definition. “Theirs is the story,” he writes, “not so much of the creation of professions from scratch, as of the transition from an older, long existing professional outlook and mentality to newer, more specialized versions of it.”⁶ In 1890, “humanism” referred to a historically specific moment of thought: that of the Renaissance scholars who reasoned up from human works and down from theological principles and looked to the classical world for inspiration. By 1940, the “humanities” constituted a bounded academic space: a set of departments, curricula, national organizations, and patrons.

Within the still relatively new philanthropic foundations, officers struggled to find a compelling justification for investment in the humanities that would suggest how to direct their largesse. In a paper presented to a joint meeting of the several Rockefeller philanthropies in 1924, Edwin R. Embree, a Rockefeller Foundation officer, discussed the humanities as “of the greatest importance to any well balanced society,” but nonetheless saw the field as one generally addressed only after more basic needs were satisfied, like a “leisure time activity.” He noted that “the humanities and the fine arts ... are in danger of neglect today in the world generally and in America in particular” and that there was “little concerted effort or wise giving” in those fields.⁷

So foundation officers consulted with leading scholars. One approach defined the humanities in contradistinction to science and, by extension, technology and its applications. “Let us then emphasize the fact,” wrote one university committee of humanists, “that though we discover new oil wells and know to the minute when the down turn of the business cycle will occur, and that though lightning and the tides may be harnessed to make our morning toast, we shall be as poor

5. This section draws on a paper given by my ACLS colleague Steven Wheatley at the Annual Meeting of Organization of American Historians in Louisville in 1988, entitled “The Humanities Have Had Their Innings: Rockefeller Support for the Humanities in the 1920s and 1930s.”

6. Laurence Veysey, “The Plural Organized Worlds of the Humanities,” in Alexandra Oleson and John Voss, eds., *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860-1920*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 58.

7. Edwin F. Embree, “Gedney Farms Paper,” Records of the Rockefeller Foundation, Record Group 3, Series 900, Box 22, folder 165, Rockefeller Archive Center, Pocantico Hills, New York. (Hereafter cited as RF-3-900-22-165.)

as the Australian bushman if we have no music, no poetry, no painting.”⁸ While the humanities might not possess the obvious utility of science, their advocates claimed they spoke to transcendent values, that the study of the humanities was “good-in-itself,” that the humanities were not of instrumental value, but “terminal value.”⁹

But to Abraham Flexner, the foundation officer who first developed humanities initiatives on the Rockefeller Boards, the sciences and the humanities were methodologically and epistemologically identical: “For humanism must,” he wrote, “like natural science, procure data, generalize, interpret. Painstaking, sometimes monumental, works bear witness to the efforts of humanism to obtain accurate data.” He pronounced it “thoroughly sound” that “the scientific side of humanistic studies has ... in the last century been strongly emphasized.” Flexner’s views of the humanities freely mixed Matthew Arnold’s reverence for taste with a commitment to research. “Science,” he wrote, “has had its repercussions throughout the entire range of human activities, affecting our thinking as well as our doing; it has largely—alas, not yet wholly—destroyed the puny notions within which religion, philosophy, and history respectively once led a relatively easy intellectual existence.”¹⁰ Still, Flexner found a fundamental core to the humanities. “The assessment of values, in so far as human beings are affected, constitutes the unique burden of humanism,” he wrote. “Sooner or later the humanist, as humanist, must concern himself with worthwhileness; he must raise the question of value, not only in the particular field in which he operates scientifically, but elsewhere.”¹¹

In 1923, Flexner prepared a memorandum asking that the Rockefeller Foundation Board authorize an inquiry by the officers into work in the humanities, which might be particularly necessary because, he had noticed, “[h]umanistic activities do not pay.”¹² (Have you noticed that, too?) After discussions with leading humanists, Flexner concluded that the problem was that university authorities had been “apathetic” and the humanists “unaggressive.” Nonetheless there was “an eager, able, devoted and active group of men who, if organized, [could] ... bring pressure upon the academic authorities ... to do something to withstand the narrow scientific and the materialistic trend in America.”¹³ But these scholars had been marginalized. “It was pathetic to hear them, one after another, say to me privately that this was the first time in their lives that anybody had turned a sympathetic ear to them or had invited them to talk out.”¹⁴

In March 1927, Flexner recommended that the Rockefeller Board seek to strengthen campus cohorts of humanists by supporting “far-reaching scholarly objects” and concentrating on a few “large special projects” conducted by eminent scholars as exemplars for the country as a whole. Because he felt that it was impossible for the Foundation itself to judge individual projects, Flexner suggested that Rockefeller provide support to the then nascent ACLS for that work, and thus began our Fellowship program. Travel for scholars was also important because “in the

8. Johns Hopkins University - Humanities - Fluid Research, 1939, RF-1.1-200-237-2826.

9. “Memorandum for Dr. Stevens,” 1939, RF-1.1-200-237-2826.

10. Flexner, “The Burden of Humanism,” in Norman Foerster, ed., *The Humanities After the War* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1944) 40-43.

11. Flexner, *The Burden of Humanism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929) 51.

12. “Memorandum for the Board Meeting,” January 18, 1923, Records of the General Education Board (GEB), GEB 1-2-314-3277.

13. “Conference on Humanistic Studies,” GEB 1-2-314-3281.

14. “Conference on Humanistic Studies,” GEB 1-2-314-3281.

humanities, America will not suffice at all.” He felt that associations or learned societies should be supported as well. A program with such elements might address the problems that had to be solved “if humanism is to play its part in the civilizing of the American people.”¹⁵

Thus Flexner began to lay the basis for systematic development of leading humanities faculties through the selective endowment of universities that would cooperate with him. Some Board members remained wary precisely because the humanities were so dependent on subjective judgment. “Any program ... requires the constant evaluation and supervision of an individual possessing the highest discriminatory taste,” one concerned Board member wrote to Flexner. “A decline towards mediocrity ... in this field is far easier, less immediately and sharply observable than in fields of science.”¹⁶

Although Flexner solicited proposals from elite universities for his endowment program, he did not have the opportunity to carry it out. When the Rockefeller philanthropic boards were reorganized in 1928, he was dismissed. But the humanities did survive that reorganization, as a program within the newly constituted Rockefeller Foundation, and the search for its justification started anew.¹⁷

That task fell to David H. Stevens, a Milton scholar from the University of Chicago, who became director of the Foundation’s Humanities Division. Stevens, one of the first recipients of an ACLS grant, defined the humanities as “that learning [that] keeps alive the remembrance of great ideas from which choice is made.”¹⁸ Yet the “values” encoded in the humanities would have no value unless communicated to students and the general public. “[T]he humanists in and out of universities have two obligations—to increase the body of learning and to interpret human values for the benefit of the public mind. When they do both they are at their full task.”¹⁹ “The humanities, if they are to accomplish what they should as human and humane activities, must educate students in the techniques of reflective commitment.”²⁰ Teaching is vital, both inside the academy and without.

In complying with that mandate, the Rockefeller Humanities Division developed a program that included cooperation with state departments of education in developing materials for adult education, and school and community programs in music, drama, film, and art appreciation. Less than one-half the Foundation’s grants supported research, and perhaps not surprisingly, after more than a decade of support and development, the intellectual profile of the humanities was not entirely clear to all sectors of the research support system. Transmitting a report on the work of humanists at his university, Johns Hopkins President Isaiah Bowman complained to David Stevens that “[a] prime difficulty in securing a proper appreciation for the humanities is the inability of men in the field to make their purposes clear.... [They too often descend to] glittering generalities. Humanists have a special way of writing. They repeat each other’s

15. Flexner, “The Humanities,” January 1927, GEB 1-2-314-3278.

16. Charles P. Howland to Abraham Flexner, April 11, 1927, GEB 1-2-314-3278.

17. Report, Harvard University - Fluid Research Fund - Humanities, 1938, RF-1.1-200-233-2779.

18. “Brief Summary of the Conferences of Trustees and Officers,” October 1930, RF-3-900-22-166.

19. David H. Stevens, *The Changing Humanities: An Appraisal of Old Values and New Uses* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1953) xi.

20. Theodore M. Greene, “The Realities of our Common Life,” in *The Humanities After the War*, Norman Foerster ed., (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1944) 36-37.

language.” Humanists, he felt, were too content with displays of specialization and tended “to neglect the relationships of their findings with present-day life.”²¹

The advent of World War II intensified the stress on the transmission of values as the most important mission of the humanities. Wendell Wilkie wrote in *The American Scholar* in 1943 that “so important are the liberal arts for our future civilization that I feel that education in them should be as much a part of our war planning as the more obviously needed technical training.” Yet he cautioned that “[i]n pleading for the humanities I am not pleading any gospel of high-browism,” which he explicitly linked with the triumph of totalitarianism. In his view, indeed, it had been the malign influence of the disciplinarily focused, research-oriented German university that “encouraged the sacrifice of methods that make for wide intelligence to those which are concerned only with specialized knowledge ... which has made it so easy for a crowd of governmental gangsters like Hitler’s outfit to commandeer a whole population.”²² If calls for General Education programs periodically resound to make the world safe for democracy again (true after both World War I and II), even more so was the felt need for the humanities, as the core of liberal arts education. Thus the “new humanist” Norman Foerester wrote: “If in this crisis of civilization the university is to serve the state and the nation fundamentally, its departments of the humanities will have to set their house in order.”²³

In proposing a wartime program to the Rockefeller Foundation Board, Stevens defined the goal of the humanities as “to communicate and to interpret cultural values of a contemporary significance.” The study of foreign languages and cultures had demonstrated their immediate necessity. Similarly, research and teaching about American history might restore balance in a world that seemed to have lost its memory, and thus its bearings. Again, it was stressed that “[i]f the world is to recover its memory and then its sense of values, it needs to develop people who know the sources, the means, and the ends of daily existence.”²⁴

Looking back on the Rockefeller Foundation’s humanities program in 1946, Stevens had several observations. “In so varied an area as humanities, it is not simple to maintain steady inquiry or to specialize too intently on a few aims,” but one had rather to seek targets of opportunity. He recognized the difficulty “of evaluating work in the Humanities, where so much depends upon judgment of individual ability.” Developments were uneven, he acknowledged, but he saw a considerable record of achievement, particularly in stimulating new discussions of methods of teaching history, new interest among historians in biography, and, the development of “special restatements of the humanistic tradition in liberal education” for undergraduate students.²⁵

Rockefeller Foundation President Raymond Fosdick wrote to his successor in 1949 that humanists, “all those who fashion ideas and concepts that give meaning and value to life and furnish patterns of conduct,” were needed so that “selfish and savage instincts can be civilized.”

21. Isaiah Bowman to David Stevens, March 15, 1939, RF-1.1-22-237-2826.

22. Wendell L. Wilkie, “Freedom and the Liberal Arts,” *The American Scholar* (Spring 1943): quoted in 3-5.

23. Norman Foerester, “A University Prepared for Victory,” in *The Humanities After the War*, Norman Foerester, ed., (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1944) 30.

24. Stevens, “Humanities” in Rockefeller Foundation, “Tentative Divisional Reports on a Post-War Program of the RF,” 1944, RF-3-900-23-175.

25. Stevens, “Digest of Statement for Humanities to the Trustee Committee on Program,” April 22, 1946, RF-3-900-23-177.

But reviewing the Foundation's work in the humanities, Fosdick shared Stevens' mixed feelings at its success, confessing that "in this difficult field our performance falls short of our ideals," even if the program was "excellent, so far as it goes" and all too often described in "fuzzy" terms by program officers. His remarks were a comment on a yearning the Humanities Division never quite fulfilled: "Somehow we aren't addressing ourselves to the core of the question—the spiritual hunger and aimlessness of our generation. How do we meet it? I don't know the answer, but I feel the lack of it every time an item in the humanities is presented to the Trustees."²⁶

If this short history of philanthropic support for the humanities is less than triumphal, it is perhaps because the Rockefeller officers were seeking to balance the same set of imperatives that confront us today: the need for a vigorous and exacting scholarly culture that also speaks to the public sphere. If one decisive element of the utility of the humanities is our role as the custodians of what Fosdick referred to as "concepts that give meaning and value to life," then we must project those concepts beyond the campus. But a vigorous and rigorous scholarly culture—our best safeguard against the "decline towards mediocrity" feared by that Rockefeller Foundation Board member—may incline towards a bounded academic space within which the specialist thrives but the generalist feels unwelcome. Flexner had proposed that the foundation attend first to building a strong institutional base for specialization, but the more balanced approach it adopted did not succeed in accomplishing this.

What is the place of the humanities in foundation philanthropy today? The glass remains less than half full. We have our redoubts—those relatively few foundations that seek partnerships with academic humanists to sustain, advance, and apply the best scholarship and research. That short list must begin with The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, but also includes the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and, still, the Rockefeller Foundation. But among the next generation of philanthropies—those produced not by industrial wealth but by the productivity of the information age—only the Hewlett Foundation and the Packard Humanities Institute work in our fields. A recent report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences noted that foundation giving to the humanities is a declining portion of such philanthropy.²⁷ This suggests, again, the need for the humanities community, in all its breadth, to present itself to a new generation of philanthropists and foundation officials, one that is likely to ask the same questions as those that vexed the managers of the Rockefeller philanthropies in the 1920s and 1940s.

The American system of research support, of course, is no longer, as it was in the 1920s, a system led entirely by private philanthropy. To move to my second stage, consider how the federal government entered into that system after World War II, first in the sciences (and parts of the social sciences), and then in 1965, in the humanities and the arts. Overarching historical conditions provided the context supporting those institutional innovations, but the efforts of specific advocates were the proximate cause.

26. Raymond Fosdick to Charles I. Barnard, February 7, 1946, RF-3-900-23-177.

27 Steven Lawrence, Loren Renz and James Allen Smith (contributor), *Foundation Funding for the Humanities: An Overview of Current and Historical Trends* (New York: The Foundation Center, in cooperation with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2004) 1. http://www.amacad.org/publications/human_funding.pdf.

As I noted earlier, Vannevar Bush's 1945 report had resulted relatively quickly in the establishment of the National Science Foundation. As leaders of the humanities tried to replicate this impressive achievement, one of the more effective case statements came from Howard Mumford Jones, a Harvard professor of English, a founder of the field of American Studies, and Chair of the Board of the ACLS. Under Jones' leadership, ACLS formed a commission of leading scholars and businessmen to deliberate on the role of the humanities in public life. The commission met for two years and in 1959, Jones published a book-length essay drawn from its deliberations, entitled *One Great Society: Humane Learning in the United States*.²⁸ Jones' arguments are worth recalling because of their supple and effective presentation.

Jones imagines a series of questions that "[a] leading businessman" would ask "if called upon to support scholarship in this field":

- What are the humanities?
- Why is it that you think the humanities are so important?
- Speaking quite practically, what can the humanities do for me, for my family, for my business, for my community?
- Do the humanities make people better? Do they make people happier? Do they make people more capable? How do you know?

"These are intelligent questions," he affirms, adding with becoming modesty that "[i]t does not affect the excellence of the questions that some of them are unanswerable."²⁹

What are the humanities? "The primary business of the humanities is to make the human heritage man looks back upon meaningful and available as individual experience rather than as mass and generalization."³⁰

Why are the humanities so important? Because, Jones notes, "each of us also knows, deep down and underneath, that he is something or somebody neither the doctor nor the sociologist can quite get at." "People live in crowds, societies, and states and we can compute a good many facts about them, but they do not really live in multitudes; they live apart, each in the secret chamber of [the] self." Furthermore, "The revelations of life, art, emotion, and wisdom gleaned from the records of man are ... precisely what the humanities have to give. Theirs is the area where, once we have mastered the language and understood the techniques of artist, writer, and philosopher, we slowly learn ways of facing the unpredictable and reconciling ourselves to what is inevitable. By so doing we transform ourselves and, in the long run, transform society."³¹

What are the practical benefits of the humanities? Jones notes that "Americans have developed an enormous respect for exact knowledge," and it is humanistic knowledge that produces most reference books, dictionaries, encyclopedias. "[W]ithout the activity of [humanities] scholars,

28. Howard Mumford Jones, *One Great Society: Humane Learning in the United States* (New York: Harcourt; Brace, 1959)

29. Jones 3-5.

30. Jones 9.

31 Jones 10, 8, 59.

about one third of our available information about [the human] would ... grow more untrustworthy ... and ... eventually disappear.”³²

Do the humanities make people better? Jones’ response to this question is balanced and nuanced, but still forceful and convincing. “The humanities,” he notes, “have no monopoly on educational virtue, but they can and do maintain a noble educational end: keeping in view the ways by which individuals can be led to maturity through the development of intelligence and the refinement of sensibility ... The humane person is not merely the product of the humanities, but he is a person who, recognizing the great intent of humane learning, strives to keep his own learning, be it scientific, social or humanistic, truly humane.”³³

“Perhaps nobody knows how to make any human being better, happier, and more capable,” Jones continues, “but at the very least the humanities, humane learning, and humanistic scholarship help to sustain a universe of thought in which these questions have meaning and in which adults may have the opportunity to work out such problems for themselves.”³⁴

Jones resists yielding to the advocate’s understandable temptation to package the benefits of humanistic learning neatly with a promise of easy and early delivery. Humanistic scholarship both enables and requires clear exposition, but “Writing is not a ‘skill’ like skating or running a typewriter,” he cautions. “[I]t is a totality of expression involving not only the speech habits of the individual who writes but also the existence of a verbal environment less bare than the language of television shows ... One does not, one cannot, learn to ‘write’ by taking a single course in English composition; only long exposure to the humanities, only the private discovery that mastering the art of communication is in the long run a battle” can develop the writer, rather than simply the writing. “The humanities, rightly understood, are philosophical discourse, not ‘training.’ They furnish a point of view; they do not give out ‘tools’ and ‘skills’ like premiums.”³⁵

Finally, Jones recognizes clearly the often competing aims of accessibility and specialization. On the one hand, he argues, public understanding of the humanities is crucial to public support. On the other, he acknowledges “the privileges of expertise. All specialization requires a special vocabulary and cannot go forward without one.”³⁶

Much of Jones’ argument was repeated a few years later by the Commission on the Humanities appointed in 1963 by ACLS, the Council of Graduate Schools, and the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa. This Commission’s *Report* argued for the creation of a National Foundation for the Humanities and the Arts, and returned to the theme of values.³⁷

“The humanities are the study of that which is most human,” the *Report* begins. “Throughout man’s conscious past they have played an essential role in forming, preserving, and transforming

32. Jones 20, 22.

33. Jones 19.

34. Jones 181.

35. Jones 191-2.

36. Jones 185.

37. *Report of the Commission on the Humanities* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, the Council of Graduate Schools and United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, 1964).

the social, moral, and aesthetic values of every man in every age. One cannot speak of history or culture apart from the humanities. They not only record our lives; our lives are the very substance they are made of. Their subject is every[one]. We propose, therefore, a program for all our people, a program to meet needs no less serious than that for national defense. We speak, in truth, for what is being defended—our beliefs, our ideals, our highest achievements.” The Commission anticipated an important public role for the humanities, not merely “as academic disciplines confined to schools and colleges, but as functioning components of society which affect the lives and well-being of all the population.”³⁸

Not surprisingly, the *Report* focused intently on civic purposes, on “America’s Need of the Humanities.” “Democracy demands wisdom of the average man. Without the exercise of wisdom free institutions and personal liberty are inevitably imperiled. To know the best that has been thought and said in former times can make us wiser than we otherwise might be, and in this respect the humanities are not merely our, but the world’s best hope.” This was, indeed, a project with international implications. “Neither superior force, nor vast wealth or preponderant technology could entitle any country to world leadership. Only the elevation of its goals and the excellence of its conduct entitle one nation to ask others to follow its lead.”³⁹

And, quite presciently, while the *Report*’s authors found no difficulties with an argument for bigger government to provide the support necessary in the US, they also recognized the political dangers posed by this source. Scholarship and art, they claimed, must remain free, and like science, must be allowed to judge their ends and means according to their own criteria. “A government which gives no support at all to humane values is careless of its own destiny, but that government which ... seeks to acquire influence—may be more dangerous still ... [W]e must safeguard the independence, the originality, and the freedom of expression of all who are concerned with liberal learning.”⁴⁰

When testifying before Congress on the bill to establish the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Education Association, one of my predecessors as ACLS President, Frederick Burkhardt, stressed the broad public purpose of the initiative. “If what was at stake here was nothing more than the pleadings of a group of scholars who wanted more for themselves, or who were selfishly concerned for the advancement of their own narrow specialties, I can assure you that I would not be appearing before you today. Or, if I did appear, it would be to take the other side.”⁴¹

In retrospect, the creation of the National Endowment for the Humanities may mark the moment of maximum harmony between the humanists’ sense of themselves and the public perceptions of the humanities. Indeed, it is worth remembering that two decades later, it was NEH itself during the Chairmanship of, first, William Bennett and then Lynne Cheney that issued some of the most corrosive charges *against* the academic humanities in the controversies we now loosely group under the heading of the “culture wars.” I do not wish to retrace how questions about the literary canon soon ignited polemical cannonading across the op-ed pages. I do want to note, however,

38. *Report* 1, 2.

39. *Report* 4, 5.

40. *Report* 8.

41. Statement of Frederick Burkhardt before a Joint Committee of Congress, February 26, 1965. ACLS file.

that what was very much at issue were the dynamics of academic specialization and professionalization, which bring us to the third phase of my discussion. Were humanities scholars bent on erecting an edifice of knowledge that, while intellectually powerful, walled off humanities scholarship from the public? This question troubled another one of my predecessors, the late John D'Arms, who, while affirming that "the intellectual contributions of postmodernist theoretical approaches have significantly affected the way in which many of us go about our work," asked whether, "in their reformulations of such fundamental human concerns, have not our scholarly communities been distancing themselves from the broader society that supports us?"⁴²

Perhaps because part of the dynamic of humanities scholarship is self-reflection, others have raised similar questions. Speaking at an ACLS Annual Meeting, New York University historian Thomas Bender stated that:

To the extent that we follow a pattern of withdrawal from the public culture, we become vulnerable to those simple questions that often enrage us: *What do you do? What good is it?* We err if we respond that "it's none of your business" or that "you would not understand," which amounts to the same thing. These are fair questions, and if we cannot answer them for our neighbors in everyday language, we should be concerned.⁴³

Bender recommends that we continually renegotiate "our relation to our society and to that society's many and diverse habitats of knowledge." In making this assertion, "he writes, "I would not wish to be understood as saying that the university must cease to be a distinctive habitat of knowledge. To the contrary, I am pleading for a distinctiveness achieved without isolation."⁴⁴

Louis Menand of Harvard, himself something of a public intellectual, worries, however, that "[t]alk about 'values' and 'civic education' [in the humanities] is still mostly deanspeak; it's the philosophical padding for certain intellectual changes for which no one has yet devised a very coherent public-relations-tested rationale."⁴⁵

This brings us back to the question of the public image of the humanities as the realm of enduring values in a changing world. Is that just "deanspeak"? (As a former dean, I should know whereof I speak.) Can we develop a "coherent public-relations-tested rationale" for our fields that does not include the question of value, the question so stressed in the past? This issue has already arisen in the ACLS/AAU roundtable process that I mentioned earlier.

As one of the aims of this overall initiative is to align perspectives from within the humanities with conceptions of those fields held by potentially sympathetic outsiders, discussions across

42. John H. D'Arms, "Funding Trends in the Academic Humanities, 1970-1995: Reflections on the Stability of the System," *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, Alvin Kernan, ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997) 54.

43. Thomas Bender, "Locality and Worldliness," in *The Transformation of Humanistic Studies in the Twenty-first Century: Opportunities and Perils*, ACLS Occasional Paper No. 40 (New York: 1997) 8.

44. Bender 8.

45. Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas*, ACLS Occasional Paper No. 49 (New York: 2001) 12.

disciplines on the same campus can be an ideal, and often revealing, starting point. Case Western Reserve University President Edward Hundert has reported that colleagues from the sciences were active participants in the roundtables held last spring at his institution. The scientists maintained a high opinion of the role of humanities research, but it turned out not to be a role that all humanists were comfortable with. The scientists expected that the humanities would help locate meaning and value in a world of ever-increasing complexity. This expectation made some humanities scholars uncomfortable, those who saw their role as contextualizing and historicizing different conceptions of meanings and values, not in providing prescriptions for today's problems. The tension between these views was interesting intellectually but also a challenge to developing a coherent and compelling "case statement" for the humanities.

It is precisely in the attempt to resolve this tension that the distinctive qualities of humanistic inquiry can be discerned. As Robert Scholes noted in his 2004 Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association, "We cannot make ourselves or anyone else virtuous, but we can illuminate the question of what virtue is."⁴⁶ Or as literary scholar Christina Crosby puts it, "the value of studying literature is precisely that it poses value as a question, not an answer."⁴⁷ Luke Menand maintains that "[t]he academic's job in a free society is to serve the public culture by asking the questions the public does not want to ask, by investigating the subjects it cannot or will not investigate, by accommodating the voices it fails or refuses to accommodate. Academics need to look to the world to see what kind of teaching and thinking needs to be done, and how they might better organize themselves to do it; but they need to ignore the world's insistence that they reproduce its self-image."⁴⁸

That that self-image hardly bears reproduction goes without saying. Incoherence, tumult, and conflict in religion, culture, ethics and aesthetics, real crises of meaning and value, are rather the order of the day.

The humanities bring focus, reflection, interpretation, and learning to these issues. They provide the means for understanding and appreciating other cultures through the study of language, the arts, religion, philosophy, history, and social life of peoples who exist not in an imagined isolation but in actual conditions of extensive interaction and mutual change. They help make sense of a world where cultures, economies, and value systems brush up with increasing frequency and speed against each other and are transformed in the process. The humanist's insistence on local knowledge plays a crucial role in concentrating the vision of an otherwise monocular globalizing lens.

Another "lens" that increasingly clarifies the public vision, and one that also presents an unprecedented opportunity for humanistic scholarship, is the computer screen. I know that the University of Nebraska, Lincoln understands well that the humanities have a huge role to play in this world. Nebraska already is a leader in the development of such digital resources as the Willa Cather Papers and the Whitman archive, and the recent recruitment of Will Thomas promises an even greater intensification of digital research here. This emerging digital environment is not

46. Robert Scholes, "Presidential Address 2004: The Humanities in a Posthumanist World," *PMLA* 120.3 (2005): 731.

47. Russell A. Berman, "Why Major in Literature—What Do We Tell Our Students?" *PMLA* 117.3 (2002): 403.

48. Menand 21.

just—although this is vitally important—a means for accessing the extant cultural record of humankind, but is increasingly the site for the production and transmission of human creativity.

The scope of this change is epoch-making. Every year, the world produces five exabytes of new information, and 92 percent of that production is stored not in print, but on magnetic media. How much, you may ask, is five exabytes? Merely 37,000 times the amount of information in the Library of Congress.⁴⁹ It is a marvelous fact that the storage and transmission of that astonishing amount of information is *not* a technological problem. But its intellectual and practical organization is a challenge that our disciplines must engage.

The expanding online environment both requires and enhances the informational, methodological and interpretive capacities of the humanities. This is a matter of great concern to the ACLS; its draft report on cyberinfrastructure in the humanities and social sciences—issued for public comment—is available on our website (www.acls.org) and some of my remarks on this subject are drawn from that report.⁵⁰ A world of ubiquitous computing with constant access to ever-increasing amounts of information will need the means to organize and contextualize that information and the solution lies near at hand, in our own traditions. The humanities provide information that leads to knowledge, as well as methods for creating and organizing new knowledge. As Howard Mumford Jones noted, the dictionary and the encyclopedia are examples of the eminent practicality of humanistic learning in making information meaningful, relational, and contextual. The humanities increase our knowledge of knowledge itself. Philosophers ask “How do we know what we know?” Linguists analyze how language structures meaning. Literary scholars explain how reading and writing not only yield meaning but inspire feeling. Scientists, when beginning research on a new problem, often turn to the history of science to understand the work that has gone before. And all of this knowledge—scientific, social scientific, and humanistic—is ultimately interconnected.

The online world should not be just the stage for the presentation of humanistic knowledge, but can be itself the object of humanistic study. If the humanities are about reading, writing, seeing, listening, and knowing, the digital realm is changing how we do each of these, and it will only grow as the means and site of human creativity and cultural expression. If we are to understand the online world as well as we understand the ancient world, humanities scholars will need the tools and capacities for the digital environment.

We may live in the “information age” and earn our livelihoods in a “knowledge economy,” but human beings define themselves through values and make the leap from mere existence to a life through imagination and feeling. It is through humanistic scholarship that we can grasp and test the values that have sustained and explained the human condition in societies past and present. As Patricia Meyer Spacks has written, “The study of the humanities reveals in new terms, terms that we can recognize, the enduring vitality and meaning of past achievements, and it encourages

49. “How Much Information?” School of Information Management Systems, University of California, Berkeley. <http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info-2003/execsum.htm#summary>.

50. “The Draft Report of the American Council of Learned Societies’ Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for Humanities and Social Sciences,” <http://www.acls.org/cyberinfrastructure/acls-ci-public.pdf>.

the fresh energies of our immediate culture—new ways of thinking, new objects of thought.”⁵¹ The humanities provide the perceptual and imaginative skills that make those past achievements and the creativity of today meaningful. And we do so today without asserting an opposition to science, or relying on an unproblematized notion of value, or retreating into a self-enclosed world of academic speculation.

A world—public culture, university education—without a strong voice in the humanities would be impoverished and diminished. The reverse is equally true: the academic humanities without a strong public rapport or collegueship within the university will deserve the marginalization those absences will assure. We must assert that case, we can assert that case, and we can do so without apology.

51. Patricia Meyer Spacks, quoted in W. Robert Connor, “The Director’s Desk,” *Ideas*, 5.1 (1997). <http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us:8080/ideasv51/connor.htm>.