THE HUMANITIES IN THE UNIVERSITY:
STRATEGIES FOR THE 1990's

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American Council of Learned Societies
New York, N.Y. April 15, 1988

ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 6
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The University and the Larger Community

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Teaching the Humanities in the University

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Humanistic Research

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The Annual Meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies affords an opportunity for scholars and teachers of the humanities in the 46 disciplines and sub-disciplines represented by the Council's constituent societies to engage in formal and informal conversation on topics of broad common interest. The main formal session of the 1988 Annual Meeting was a panel discussion on the subject of “The Humanities in the University.”

The Council invited six speakers to address three principal sets of questions: the relationship between university- and college-based humanists and the broader public, the role of teaching the humanities in the university, and the role of scholarship in the humanities in institutions of higher education. ACLS was fortunate to assemble an unusually stimulating panel: Dr. Roderick S. French, Vice President for Academic Affairs at George Washington University, Professor Merrill D. Peterson, formerly Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia, Dr. Susan Resneck Parr, Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tulsa, Professor Margaret B. Wilkerson of the Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, Professor W. Robert Connor of the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University, and J. Hillis Miller of the Department of English at the University of California at Irvine.

The speakers were paired two to a topic: Peterson and French spoke on questions of public outreach, Parr and Wilkerson on teaching, and Connor and Miller on research. The resulting discussion prompted spirited debate in the three topically organized group conversations that followed. ACLS is pleased to be able to publish the remarks of the speakers in this, our sixth Occasional Paper. They appear here as they were originally presented, with only minor editorial changes made by the authors.
My particular assignment this morning is, I believe, to concentrate on strategies for exploiting opportunities for the academic humanities in non-academic settings, outside universities and colleges. Professor Peterson will do more to develop the conceptual framework for the involvement of the humanities in public life.

In this connection, I heard a very interesting session at the Conferences of Secretaries yesterday. It was a panel on the evolution of our disciplines. The question was asked, but not answered, as to where one finds, or how one defines, a public for the humanities, for our disciplines. What I have to say this morning can be taken as one line of answer to that question. There are, I think, two important contemporary developments in our society. One we might call organizational or institutional, and the other is more broadly cultural. Both are ambivalent or at least have some paradoxical qualities, and I will try to describe each briefly.

First the institutional, or organizational, that is the easier one to describe. I have in mind the phenomenal formation over the last 17 years of the state humanities councils. I assume most of us are familiar with them to some extent, but let me refresh our memories by just doing the main outlines on these organizations.

The starting point of course is the law that authorizes NEH which mandates that 20 percent of the program funds allocated for the Endowment each year must pass directly through the Endowment to the state councils for regranting at the local level. The councils are voluntary bodies with very small staffs and low overheads. There also is a kind of multiplying factor in that all the regrants have to be fully matched, at least in kind if not in dollars. There is also a new trend that some of you may not be aware of and that is for state legislatures to vote additional allocations from state funds to the state humanities.
councils. The last, but perhaps the most critical point for our purposes, is that the one inflexible requirement is that every program that receives support from a state humanities council must have one humanities scholar involved in a central way.

The collective impact of this is rather astounding. The last time someone tried to count, I believe it was estimated that there are some 4,000 programs a year receiving some degree of support from state councils and that the audiences for these exhibits, lectures, books, films, and conferences total some 25 million adult Americans. One way of looking at all of this would be to say that the state council movement represents the largest public works program for academic humanists since the Depression or, if you prefer, the greatest patronage system since the Renaissance.

Important as this welfare aspect may be, I want to relate this tidal wave of public programs to the more central concerns of our colleagues who do history or philosophy or literary studies. Let me first acknowledge parenthetically that no doubt many academic humanists have had very disappointing experiences in state council programs just as we sometimes do, alas, in the classroom. Sometimes state council programs are trivial; sometimes audiences lack the sophistication necessary to the topic. All of that is just normal frailty in any enterprise. But I know from personal experience that there are literally hundreds of our colleagues in the academic humanities who if they could be here this morning would testify with enthusiasm that state programs have provided them with settings in which they could experiment with new interpretations of familiar materials, in which they could improve their pedagogical skills, from which they have received stimulation for new lines of scholarly inquiry, and through which they have established valuable partnerships with their colleagues in elementary and secondary schools. So to see state programs simply as a way of providing honoraria for faculty delivering recycled classroom lectures is to miss the main point. The state humanities programs represent nothing less than opportunities for creative extensions of our scholarship and pedagogy.

Let me acknowledge in passing that I know by heart the various disincentives for this kind of participation, including the reward system for members of the academic professions. As one who signs all the promotion and tenure letters for a faculty of 1,200, I have no illusions
as to how much involvement in these kinds of programs counts when it comes time for peer review in the departments. But that is simply a fact of academic life against which we have to try to do something.

What I most want to emphasize is that the state council movement, and it does have the quality of a movement, is rapidly expanding our external constituencies. At least two things are happening. First, state councils are retrieving our lost alumni. What I mean to designate by that term are those tens of thousands of men and women who are graduates of liberal arts colleges who can remember very well being entranced by the reading of Dostoyevsky or George Eliot or who remember one semester in which they absolutely lost themselves in the study of the Italian Renaissance. But their initiation was not deep enough to enable them to sustain this engagement with our fields in the environments of their post-college lives, often unsupportive or even inimical environments. Now those people are coming back to the humanities, as it were, through state council programs. The other new recruits are a more inchoate lot. They are coming in as a kind of by-product of various movements or movements variously described in our society — the back to basics people. Those who wish to reclaim a legacy or to rediscover traditional values or to restore civic virtue in public life. I think we are all familiar with this strand of thinking and the many voices which articulate that thinking.

Now to come to the second point, I realize that all of this renewed public interest makes some of our colleagues rather nervous because they feel that the humanities are in no condition to respond to this avalanche of new interest. They fear that our wars of critical theories and our conflicting ideological interpretive stances will quickly diminish or even extinguish this new public romance with the humanities.

I want to take my last minute to say that I very much do not share that anxiety. I do not see these lively intellectual movements in our fields as exercises in self-destruction. I was thinking about this yesterday in terms of two specimen texts representing the arguments and counterarguments about relativism or the contingency of everything. One is a line from the most celebrated of the fundamentalists, Allan Bloom, and the other passage is by my favorite iconoclast, Richard Rorty, both having to do with this topic.

The passage in *The Closing of the American Mind* is one known to
all of us now from the many reviews, if not by direct reading of the book, wherein Professor Bloom asserts that anyone who approaches the study of Aristotle merely to discover what the Greeks thought about a given topic is not really serious about life. Some of us in this room would like to say a lot about the logical incoherence of that assertion I suppose, but I just put it forward as one example. The other passage that came to mind was from Rorty's notorious manifesto on post-modernist bourgeois liberalism in which, you may remember, he uses the illustration of the young girl who comes out of the forest. She is the sole survivor of a civilization that has been obliterated, including all of its artifacts and literary products, and the question is asked whether or not she possesses human dignity in the traditional, Kantian sense. Rorty blithely says no, that this is a culturally contingent notion ascribed to other human beings by people who hold a certain common set of beliefs. Some of the rest of us in this room would like to jump out of the window when we hear Rorty talking like that — or perhaps throw Rorty out of the window.

In all seriousness, my reason for making these citations is to say that I cannot imagine any self-respecting humanist who would not be delighted to be paid $50 or $500 to spend an evening or a Saturday exploring the grounds of, and the ramifications of, these highly accessible texts with a group of our "ordinary fellow citizens." We should of course recognize the prospect of a kind of disjunction between the so-called naive reader and esoteric theories, but that is a very different way of stating the problem. I think the ferment and indeed the conflict in our disciplines is an important manifestation of what the humanities have to offer our fellow citizens, namely, an invitation to join in that unceasing discussion of rival interpretations of the human experience that has animated the humanities from the outset.

In sum, I think that the operation of these now well-established state councils combined with the surge of popular interest in our themes and in our questions, present us with the opportunity to restore a vitality to the humanities that they could never have so long as they remain merely academic subjects. In short, I think the public is ready for the humanities. The question is whether or not the humanities are ready for the new public. I think it is the task of those of us in university administrations to assist our colleagues in taking up this opportunity. Thank you.
My only qualification for inclusion on this panel — a dubious one at best — is that I was the principal author of a report issued last fall under the title *The Humanities and the American Promise*. The report was the end-product of a colloquium that convened over some 15 months to discuss the proper place of the humanities in the lives of adult Americans. For reasons having little to do with its merits — or so I tell myself — the report was not much noticed or read. And so, with your indulgence, I propose to make the report my point of departure this morning.

The report proceeds from two cardinal assumptions: that learning in the humanities ought to be a lifetime endeavor and that the health of the humanities is critical to the health of American society and government. We suggested viewing the humanities not primarily as a set of academic disciplines, much less as great texts or sentinels of tradition, but as certain ways of thinking — of inquiring, evaluating, judging, finding, and articulating meaning. They include the developed human talents from which great texts and academic disciplines spring. They heighten consciousness. Taken together they are the necessary resources of a reflective approach to life. Concerned especially with the public currency of the humanities, we reaffirmed the Declaration of Purpose of the 1965 law creating the National Endowment for the Humanities that "democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens." The humanities are important to the shared reflection, communication, and participation required of a democratic community. They are essential to reasoned civic discourse, the improvement of which we called the first public mission of the humanities. "A citizenry that is humanistically aware is a citizenry that is capable of confronting diversity, ambiguity, and conflict, overcoming prejudice and self-interest, enlarging its sympathies, tackling tough public
issues, and envisioning possibilities beyond the limits of circumstance.

We were not essentially concerned with the humanities in the university. To achieve for them that critical presence in the society which we advocated, we said it was necessary to look beyond the university. University scholars, closely bound by traditional disciplines and engaged in research on the frontiers of knowledge, represent only one of several humanities communities. In the report we mention the educational community, counting teachers of humanities subjects in schools and colleges as well as in universities; trained professionals in museums and libraries and at historic sites, whose mission is curatorial and also interpretive to a broad audience; professionals in the media; the voluntary associations of civic groups that engage in a variety of humanities activities, often with the aid of NEH state-based programs; and, finally, the growing numbers of applied humanists, as well as of independent scholars, located somewhere between the academy and the general public. Recognizing all this, however, the universities remain the principal trustees and transmitters of the humanist tradition and necessarily have a major role to play in fulfilling the larger public mission. Drawing upon the themes of the report, I wish to make several points in this regard, then close with an audacious recommendation.

First, the American university — more accurately the college and university — is not one but many. In its almost indescribable diversity it reflects the freedom and openness, the spontaneity, dynamism, and pluralism of American society and culture. Any attempt to impose unity upon it, to prescribe educational programs, to homogenize it must fail. Multiplicity is not a choice but a condition in American education. And on the whole a uniquely valuable one, since it has meant that the American university has been open to experiment and change and responsive to the pressures of the community. In this light, clearly, any consideration of the responsibility of the university to the community outside its walls must begin with recognition of the special character of each institution and its community environment.

Second, we should recognize that public outreach — and I am thinking here of adult education in particular — was no part of the design of the modern university. Central to the design was teaching of the young and research for the advancement of knowledge. In the 19th
century adult education was carried on piecemeal, so far as it was
carried on at all, by a range of self-help associations, by networks of
Mechanics Institutes, Lyceum, and Chautauqua. Increasingly after 1900
the universities entered into adult education, but more or less as an
afterthought by way of the back door. Rarely have the programs served
the humanities well; today only a small fraction of the courses of
instruction are in the humanities. My point is — to pass on quickly —
that if the university is to assume major new responsibilities for the
liberal enlightenment of adult Americans it will have to engage in some
fundamental re-thinking and re-structuring.

Third, I think the universities — always minding the plural —
should make major new commitments in this area. One of the
recommendations of The Humanities and the American Promise is
"that colleges and universities undertake bold initiatives in public
humanities education; moreover, that academic humanists, with the
support of their institutions, assume as part of their acknowledged
responsibility communication with non-academic audiences.” This
flows, in general, not only from the requirements of democratic
citizenship but also from the ideal articulated in our time of a learning
society. To quote from the 1983 report, A Nation at Risk: “At the heart
of such a society is the commitment to a set of values and to a system
of education that affords all members the opportunity to stretch their
minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood,
learning more as the world itself changes.” No college or university
can educate young men and women for life. Nor can it, or should it
even attempt, to teach them all that they may eventually want to know
about “the best that has been thought and said in the world.” The most
it can do is to dispose the mind toward learning, to enable one
experience to serve another, and to lay the foundation for what John
Dewey called “continued capacity for growth.” The modernized life
cycle, emerging about a century ago, which drew boundaries between
stages of life — youth, adulthood, old age — and enforced a linear
separation of education, work, and leisure, is obsolete; rising in its
place is a more flexible conception which takes account of varying
paces of maturation, answers to changing needs and opportunities, and
reflects the social reality of a growing elderly population. Lifelong
learning is the ambitious goal. The university must play a major part in
realizing it.
Unfortunately, we have retreated from the goal in recent years. Everything has been cut back, including our ideals. But we were encouraged to be provocative and controversial on this panel — perhaps even to dream a little. In this spirit I offer my audacious recommendation: a citizen’s sabbatical. Citizens of a certain age, say about 50, who have satisfied certain qualifications, would be enabled to attend a college or university for one semester, or the equivalent, for the purpose of general education in the humanities and allied liberal arts and sciences. The sabbaticals might be financed by a mix of public and private support, plus a contribution from the beneficiary. I envision a program in which tens of thousands of mature Americans would attend colleges and universities every year, opening or reopening themselves to the serious study of great ideas and great issues, returning to their communities with heightened self-knowledge along with a heightened sense of civic responsibility. It is mind-boggling to contemplate the effects, saying nothing now of the difficulties, of such a program. But isn’t it time for the American people to be inspired once again by their hopes rather than daunted by their fears? And isn’t it time that we returned to the historic American promise of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” which holds out the chance to every man of realizing his humanity?
Teaching the Humanities in the University

Susan Resneck Parr

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The inspirations for my remarks this morning were H.L. Mencken and the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland: Mencken, because he insisted some problems are so difficult they can’t be solved in a million years, unless someone thinks about them for five minutes, and the Cheshire Cat because he responded to Alice’s question, “Would you please tell me which way I ought to go from here?” by saying, “That depends on where you want to get to.” And so as I thought about where we want to get to with the teaching of the humanities in my allotted few minutes this morning, my first inclination was to frame the question in its most basic and traditional terms, what is it that an educated person in our society should know and understand? Asked in this way the question almost inevitably leads back to the humanities, since I suspect most of us in this room would agree that educated people should have some knowledge and understanding of the significant ideas and events and figures and texts — literary, historical, philosophical, religious, political and artistic — of their own culture, and that of other cultures as well.

But in fact, I am afraid that the question is the wrong one, for even though America does profess to be a nation dedicated to educating all its citizens, the truth is that in our colleges and universities we are primarily engaged in mass training — vocational and preprofessional — at the secondary level as well as the collegiate one. For example, in 1986 fewer than one in four entering college freshmen intended to major in the liberal arts — compared to 40% in 1970. The numbers of students interested in studying the humanities has declined even more precipitously. Specifically, in 1966 approximately 18% of college graduates were humanities majors; by 1985, only a third of that number or approximately 6% had chosen the humanities. Such numbers also reflect changing student attitudes about the purposes of education. For example, 20 years ago approximately 44% of entering freshmen
identified “being very well-off financially” as a goal. Now 71% do so. Simultaneously, those seeking to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life” declined from 70% in 1970 to 50% in 1980 to 43% in 1986.

Although there are some heartening signs of a slightly renewed interest in the liberal arts among college students, these statistics suggest that many of our students are motivated by socioeconomic considerations rather than intellectual ones. Certainly it is the case that more and more of our students believe that the American dream is no longer alive and well, and so they see preprofessional training as offering them the surest road to financial success. Even though CEO’s of major firms (many of whose speech writers are liberal arts graduates) and deans of professional schools argue otherwise and affirm the value of the liberal arts for future doctors, lawyers, engineers and corporate employees, our students and their worried parents believe otherwise. So, unhappily, do most of the professional accrediting agencies. For example, the engineering accrediting board, ABET, requires undergraduate engineering students to complete only 16 credit hours of courses in the humanities and the social sciences, and they count writing and foreign language classes as humanities rather than skills courses. The same dismissive attitude toward the humanities characterizes a great many state teacher certification boards.

Within the academy, the humanities often suffer because the allocation of resources at many, if not most, institutions is enrollment-driven. Thus new faculty lines are going to computer science not to classics. Similarly, given the new emphasis on technology, college and university resources often now are committed to engineering and the sciences for equipment and facilities — both of which, while undeniably important, are enormously expensive.

Although there is no question but that students and colleges and universities are responding to social currents, the point I want to make this morning is that those of us who teach in Arts and Sciences disciplines are to a large extent responsible for this shift. Rather harshly stated, I think that we have abdicated, that we have quite readily and for decades simply given our students away. For example, we led the charge in the ’60’s and ’70’s to eliminate general education requirements, but we have not simultaneously offered our students compelling reasons to value the liberal arts, to choose to study it.
Perhaps most significantly, we have given away future teachers. Typically Arts and Sciences faculties across the country have not wanted to be bothered with this group of students, who of course become the very people to prepare our future students. Instead, we have allowed — and perhaps even encouraged — education faculty to teach their own version of the liberal arts in methods courses. The result has been disastrous. The state of Oklahoma, for example, requires 70 semester hours of education courses for K-8 teachers but no literature other than children’s literature and no science outside of methods courses. The consequences: a future middle school English teacher is likely to have studied no literature at all while a future eighth grade science teacher is as minimally prepared.

Because our education majors inevitably go on to teach what they know, many of our schools have also abandoned the teaching of the liberal arts and especially the humanities in any serious way. The study of literature has now given way to what is known as “language arts” while history and government courses have been abolished in favor of social studies. Indeed, today’s high school graduates on the average complete only one-and-one-half years of history during their high school career, and only 16 states mandate a world history course. Because our college freshmen come to us unprepared in the humanities, they either shy away from humanities courses or look upon them as burdens. At the same time, those who teach freshmen can assume no common core of knowledge, and so must always begin at the beginning. College level courses now cover material once typical in the high school curriculum. As Kurt Vonnegut would say, “So it goes.”

Our actions in terms of foreign language requirements are equally instructive. For example, in the late ’60s and early ’70s, many foreign language departments agreed to abolish language requirements out of the misguided notion that they didn’t want to teach to captive audiences. The results here are also discouraging in that many high schools eliminated language programs because such courses were no longer necessary for college admission. Latin suddenly became a frill. And now, in some places, computer languages are being considered substitutes for foreign languages. In fact, this is the case in some doctoral programs in education.

In recent years, all of this has been compounded by our
uncertainty as humanists about what the humanities should be. On the one hand, people like Secretary of Education William Bennett and Chicago’s Allan Bloom advocate the study only of the established canon (even though Bloom, in his closed view of the American mind, should have demonstrated conclusively that reading Plato and Rousseau doesn’t automatically lead one to wisdom and happiness). Rigidly interpreted, this approach unfortunately disdains the fruits of the new scholarship and the newly discovered texts by and about women, minorities, and people of non-Western cultures. And while the issue is a complicated one — as the Stanford faculty has acknowledged — ultimately I think it merely adds another variable, albeit an important one, to the process of selection that every teacher undergoes in designing a new course. Or to put it another way, we all share the dilemma of the Stanford faculty when we try to decide what to exclude from our courses in order to allow us to include all else that we deem to be essential.

In contrast to the Blooms and the Bennetts, indeed at the other extreme, are those who are unwilling to make any judgments at all about what is important for our students to know and understand and who argue rather fervently that no books are of any more value than any other books and therefore, of course, no more worthy of study. For example, Duke English professor Jane Tompkins is quoted in a recent Wall Street Journal article as saying that the most exciting course she has ever taught focused on the novels of Zane Grey and Louis L’Amour and such films as Stagecoach, The Wild Bunch, E.T., and Close Encounters of the Third Kind. She apparently explained to the reporter, “I’m trying to ask about the novels of Louis L’Amour the same questions that Shakespeare scholars ask of Shakespeare.” The problem with relegating Shakespeare to the same status as popular fiction is to my mind that it trivializes Shakespeare and, I suspect, the humanities altogether. It also reinforces an attitude already far too current among our students, an attitude that I think runs counter to the humanities itself, that it is sufficient to read and think only about the immediate, only about that which already interests us. Although such intellectual and ideological differences among faculty as those represented by Bloom and Tompkins are healthy, the problem, I fear, is that we have not made even that case to our incoming college freshmen.

Finally, we have also unhappily tended to give away the
humanities to skills courses, to what I have elsewhere called content-free education. Trying to teach our students skills in a vacuum, we have emphasized the process by which they read, write and think, once again, without paying concomitant attention to the significance of that which they read, write, and think about. We have become in that regard a bit like Thomas Sutpen in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* who taught himself the shottische, but did not realize that it was important to perform the dance in time to the music.

In closing, let me note that there is some good news in all of this. MIT has instituted a new humanities requirement for all its students, although its requirement of three courses is far too minimal and its reason, that "too many MIT graduates end up working for too many Princeton and Harvard graduates," not altogether satisfying. The Association of American Colleges is now working with ABET to provide some substance to the 16 hours of humanities and social sciences courses now required for engineers (and, not parenthetically, to increase the number of courses to seven or eight). Some state departments of education are allowing alternative routes to certification so that future teachers can major in the subject areas they will teach rather than in education. And some universities — like my own — have genuinely reformed general education by placing the liberal arts and especially the humanities at the center of the freshman and sophomore years for all students, whether they are Arts and Sciences majors or in the Colleges of Engineering, Nursing, or Business. But we have succeeded at the University of Tulsa because our outgoing Provost, Thomas F. Staley, has acted on his belief that while the soul of an institution is its curriculum, its conscience can be found in its budget.

Indeed, while it is crucial that Arts and Sciences faculty take responsibility for teaching all undergraduates — whether they are future majors or preprofessional students — it is as essential that administrators embrace and reward such a choice. Specifically, it is crucial that the reward structures of our colleges and universities acknowledge that teaching wonderful freshman courses deserves the same recognition as teaching wonderful graduate seminars and that liberal arts courses are as essential as preprofessional ones. But once again, it takes a certain administrative determination to break into the tyranny of the disciplines and the accompanying territorial imperatives.
that so often limit possibility — both within and outside of the classroom. I should add, by the way, that our experience at Tulsa has been that faculty scholarship has benefitted from such an approach rather than been limited by it. On the other hand, I must confess that despite our successes in revitalizing the liberal arts, we apparently have failed to reach one student who recently wrote the following in a history exam: “Socialist societies have no tolerance for liberal arts, such as erotic ballet or pornography.”
When I chose the humanities over engineering I did so because I believed in the power of the arts to move, to persuade, and to enlighten. As a high school teacher in the Watts area of Los Angeles during the 1960’s and as a student of community as well as professional theater, I discovered that the arts and humanities can play a vital role in the lives of people. The black theaters that formed out of the fiery holocaust of Watts, and riots, potential and actual, of other major cities were not simply vehicles of propaganda nor palliatives for a restless populace. They represented a natural turning to the arts of enlightenment, for their healing power, as well as for their ability to unleash the creative imagination of a people whose needs and desires had been thwarted, ignored, and dismissed.

In the Watts high school in which I taught English and directed plays for four years, I watched a young man, black and street smart (who is likely in prison now or possibly dead) tackle the “Alas Poor Yorick” speech in *Hamlet* and move from confusion over a grown man talking to a human skull, to quoting the speech to young women students on campus who wore too much makeup. I knew four young black men who spent their summer meeting and discussing Plato’s dialogues — on their own. I discovered that my below average readers could quickly raise their reading levels because they wanted to learn their lines in order to be in the school play. The student shows we produced in Watts in the ’60’s included works by Tennessee Williams, Lorraine Hansberry, Molière and Chekhov. The community that exploded into a riot in which 33 people were killed and that is now occupied by hundreds of police cracking down on drugs (no pun intended) is the place where I grew up, where I discovered the wonders of Shakespeare, where I first practiced the art of teaching the humanities. The challenge was always immediate to find in this body of
material what is truly universal — what fundamental human values speak to the young woman who must endure catcalls on her way to school or the young man whose mother's boyfriends would steal the money that he earned with his newspaper route. Without knowing it, my students were starved for the exercise of the imagination, the affirmation of the transcendent spirit of humankind, the recognition of human values that they could find in literature, theater, history, religion, philosophy, and other subjects.

Perhaps because of my own personal background and these early teaching and learning experiences, I have always assumed the humanities to be not a luxury but essential to the lives of people of whatever age, race, gender, or economic circumstance. For these subjects, properly taught, provide the framework, the context, the guidelines, if you will, not only for understanding the world, but for making decisions about one's own involvement or life in that world. So you will perhaps understand why I have little tolerance for colleagues who succumb to the intimidation of an increasingly specialized technological society, who complain that they are not appreciated, or who moan that our students are not prepared and therefore unteachable. If we find ourselves on the defensive in the humanities, then we must accept a large measure of the blame. For I fear that we have allowed narrow specialization and careerism to distract us from the broader questions of human survival and the quality of that survival that is the proper purview of the humanities. If we retreat from the frightening issues facing us, then we will deserve to be marginalized.

I need not remind us of most of those issues. Science and technology leap ahead as we fumble for the philosophical frameworks that will help our students to make decisions never before required of humankind. Last evening [April 14, 1988] Dr. John Hope Franklin eloquently described his own personal experience with the ironies and contradictions of this society. The legacy of segregation remains with us in the harsh realities of our inner cities. The 1990's and the 21st century beckon us into an uncertain future in which this country's productivity and quality of life (our retirement years, I dare say) will depend to a large extent on the skills of young people from these disintegrating neighborhoods. A knee-jerk return to the intellectual equivalent of U.S. isolationism simply will not do. Our students may become "culturally literate" in the parochial terms of Bennett, Bloom,
and Hirsch, but they (and we) will suffer from “multi-cultural illiteracy.” And, let’s face it, we live in a culturally diverse nation and world.

Teaching is at the heart of our mission as humanists. We have a public responsibility that is first manifested in our classrooms. Students are our first and most persistent public audience and that student body has changed over the past two decades and will continue to change. Last fall, my own campus, the University of California at Berkeley, admitted its first freshman class in which white students were in the minority. And our Chancellor has recently appointed an unprecedented Commission on A Changing Student Body, on which I serve, that will examine over the next two years all facets of university life in order to recommend how Berkeley can meet the new demands before it. As teachers of the humanities, we have a responsibility to connect with the world of our students whether they be returning women with children, students of color who defy easy categorization or who may be different culturally from ourselves, as well as white students culturally deprived by their own homogeneous environment. Indeed, as humanists we have the opportunity to engage these students at a level of intellectual and emotional immediacy not offered by many other subjects.

Just as demographics are driving certain changes in our institutions, so the explosion of new scholarship on and by people of color and women poses fundamental challenges to the humanities. Facile dismissal of this serious work attempts to mask a political agenda that would deny us the full and necessary democratic education which this republic requires if it is to survive long enough to forge a true and viable national identity and purpose.

Let me take a moment to mention just a few examples of this scholarship to which I refer and to comment on its potential for transforming what we teach. First there is the fundamental work, which I call “the scholarship of recovery” — the meticulous searching and bibliographic research that recovers that which was marginalized, lost, or deemed insignificant to the scholarly body. For example, the diaries and journals of women of color which tell another story of an era; the cataloging of the papers of DuBois, Garvey, and others; the rediscovery of that magnificent novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God; the attendant re-examination of the life and works of Zora Neale Hurston; the
collecting of Native American myths and legends that continue not only the history of a disenfranchised people but a view of life at once beautiful and disturbing to the Western mind; or perhaps the indexing of black newspapers and periodicals, to name only a few.

Built on these archaeological digs is the revisionist scholarship that begins to fill in gaps while challenging traditional formulations. The indexing of black newspapers and periodicals, for example, uncovering a rich array of fictional works that are revising our notions about the level of literacy among blacks at the turn of the century. In my own field, studies of ethnic theaters suggest a more central role for the performing arts in the intellectual and social formulations of ethnic peoples, such as Hispanic theaters that assist their constituencies in relocation, repatriation, and other immigration issues. Or, for example, the idea prevalent in the 1950's that chattel slavery in the United States was important but essentially peripheral to the momentous events of the 19th century must now stand alongside the theories that argue it was not only the central issue of the day but may well be the primary reason for the defeat of the South in its war for independence. Or the scholars, both white and of color, who ask, “Where were the women throughout the years? What were they doing? What were they thinking and writing?” Feminist scholarship, sparked by the Women’s Movement has added its challenge and its perspective to the growing body of knowledge about the human race; and with the help of women of color has forced us to consider the relationship of race, gender, and class to a host of ideas and subjects that had previously ignored those factors.

The double whammy of the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement has changed forever our national sensibility and the places where we search for truth. The scholarship that is hidden behind politically loaded terms like “ethnic studies,” and “minority studies,” and “feminist research” is gradually transforming the ways that we know, what we know, and our sense of identity. My favorite example is the current project to transform the American literary canon by structuring a comparativist model (an American literature of many streams rather than a single mainstream), which proposes a fundamental restructuring of our metaphorical framework. This scholarship resists mere integration or inclusion as a simple “add-on.” It proposes rather “transformation.” The implications for curricular change are exciting.
Gerald Graff, in a recent contribution to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s “Point of View” column, sets forth an idea that capitalizes on the changing situation in which we find ourselves. He argues that the new theories will not disappear, despite the abusive language of opponents. He urges rather that we fashion a curriculum that recognizes and utilizes ideological conflict.

A curriculum in which conflicting interpretive contexts and theories were negotiated out in the open would not be a retreat from literature but a way of helping students make sense of it. A tacit assumption of the curriculum is that each academic course is about other courses, as well as its own specific concerns. But teachers and students are only rarely in a position to recognize those moments of intersection, much less to engage them.

He proposes several strategies for creating a stimulating intellectual community that will help students and faculty to learn and to develop a stronger critical framework for dealing with the diverse ideas and theories now sharing our academic plate. Among my Berkeley students, I have found a hunger for the study of the humanities, particularly among those in professional and technical fields.

As learners we must also address our own ignorance, prejudices, and habits that prevent us from believing in the potential of our students. The charges of racism and sexism in the classroom are not bogus accusations but evidence of the very real conflict occurring between an aging white male faculty and a younger, more diverse student body. The conflict is not inevitable. It can be addressed. It can be treated. It seems clear to me that the needs of our students and society at large require that we speak to and teach to the broader issues of human life as the humanities have traditionally claimed to do. But in order to do that we must become learners in new, unprecedented ways, reconnect with our sister disciplines and develop institutional structures that will enhance (or at least not impede) this effort. If we are to meet the challenges of the 1990’s and beyond, we must be worthy of the term “university” with all of its implications of universality and excellence. As Jean Piaget wrote:

> The principal goal of education is to create [people] who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done — [people] who are creative, inventive and
discoverers. The second goal of education is to form minds which can be critical, can verify and not accept everything they are offered.

I believe that our changing student population, the new scholarship in our midst, and the momentous questions before us as citizens of the world, offer us an exciting opportunity to make the teaching of humanities in the university a robust and utterly essential enterprise.
First off thanks to Stan Katz and the ACLS for bringing us together today and getting us to think about the 1990's before they sneak up on us. We academics have been talking about radical change out there for a long time — in scientific development, in technology, economics, society, in moral and aesthetic judgment. Now the changes are equally inside the academy: colleges and universities are changing, financial pressures are taking new forms and intensity, the composition of student bodies and the age profiles of faculties are all shifting. But although these are important topics, I want to concentrate instead on changing patterns in humanistic research. This is based on the old fashioned idea that scholarship drives the curriculum; will, if we are alert enough, shape institutional structures; and ultimately affect the way the humanities are perceived and supported in American society.

I’d like to begin with an anecdote: Some years ago we bought a modest house next to a rather more elegant home inhabited by Rensselaer Lee, a great supporter of the ACLS, a distinguished art historian, and a gentleman of the old school. He was not, I think, accustomed to seeing neighboring freeholders doing their own yard work, but when he confronted me trimming the grass, pulling out the dandelions, or shovelling the walk he always had an appropriate Latin quotation for his classicist neighbor. If it was the day after a snowstorm he’d quote vides ut alta stet nive candida Soracete; if the snow was melting, it was Horace’s diffugere nives, and so on throughout the year. Always an appropriate Latin quotation. From time to time I would respond with a few lines of Horace or Vergil, in an effort, I must confess, to challenge what I thought at first was a pedantic display of some Latin tags. I’d quote a line or two and Rens would do the rest of the ode — the whole ode, from memory. He knew by heart more Latin poetry, than I — no, let me spare myself that — than many graduate students have read.
This called for some self-consoling rationalization on my part. I asked how he had knew so much more Latin poetry than I did — and equal quantities of Italian and yet more of English. The obvious answers that he was smarter and had worked harder were not ones that I was prepared to accept as the whole truth. Part of the answer, I convinced myself, was that studying the humanities was quite different in his generation than in mine. The scholarship of the early decades of this century was largely concerned with identifications of works, establishment of authenticity, construction of chronologies, biographies, histories of forms, institutions or genres. In my field at least for a long time teaching consisted of asking students to parse and translate, perhaps to explicate a little, and in some cases to memorize. Both in scholarship and in teaching, in other words, works of art once freed from corruption or misidentification were expected to be immediately accessible. They spoke directly without interpretation or any critical mediation.

In Rens’ case this pedagogy had “taken”. At age 70, his pleasure was fresh, simple, and direct. He simply liked the poetry — the sound of it, the images, the echoes and reverberations. There’s something to be said for that unmediated approach — simple, direct, uncluttered, and for some people at least enduring. But somewhere we passed a divide. “How does a poem mean?” we began to ask. It wasn’t sufficient to establish the text, determine authenticity, identify the metre, clarify the syntax and vocabulary, and then go on to the next poem. Interpretation had become the central task of most humanistic scholarship and teaching. We know that, I’m sure, but perhaps we have not fully adjusted to the magnitude of the change, and the peculiar way in which it has played itself out.

To talk about interpretation is to talk about meaning. And to talk about meaning confronted us with the epistemological crisis that first affected continental philosophy, then literary studies, and progressively almost all sophisticated work in the humanities. In the past few decades we have watched the old positivist models of scholarship crumble and we have become intensely aware of the ambiguities and deceptions of interpretative statements and judgments. We ran head on into the “arbitrariness of the sign.” The dismay, confusion, and sometimes the silliness that followed is not one of the great moments of humanistic scholarship. But the result has been, in many cases at
least, a greater alertness to the nature of meaning and to the challenge of interpretation.

In the midst of this epistemological crisis, we talked more and more about "reading" — reading works of art, institutions, social patterns as well as literary texts. But the more we extended the metaphor, the more intense became the problems of meaning. The reason for this, I believe, was that for a long time we thought of reading as the intersection of essentially private systems: the private world of the artist which we attempted to incorporate into our own individual visions of the world. What we encountered was the incommensurability of meaning. Often the systems simply did not intersect.

In recent years in many areas of the humanities that private understanding of "reading" has been challenged by ideas of cultural meaning. The metaphor of reading persists and continues to prove useful, but the interpretations are based on the insistence that the phenomena we study are products of a culture, and need to be understood in cultural contexts. Out of that concern with cultural meaning has come a new direction in humanistic scholarship. The participants differ a great deal in approach, rigor, and nomenclature. There are "contextualists" and "new historicists" and "new cultural historians" and countless individual practitioners who have not yet made up a name for themselves. They are a diverse and vigorous lot. That's not to say that ideas of cultural meaning are somehow beyond the reach of epistemological challenge, nor to minimize the benefits gained from literary theory and other movements in the past decades. In those years many of us indeed learned to "read" and, predictably, we'll never be quite the same again.

As we approach the 1990's humanistic scholarship is becoming much more ambitious, much more aggressive, much more confident. From the doubts of the past decades has developed a greater consciousness about the problems of methodology, and an insistence that these problems be addressed explicitly, not plowed under and passed by in silence. In many of our fields — my own I'm sure is one — we now recognize that many of the most important questions are not likely to be solved by more erudition, important as that is, but by greater clarity in defining the questions we want to ask and greater alertness to the problems of meaning within texts and cultures and
greater sophistication in using what we already know and, perhaps most important, in exploiting what our colleagues know.

Learning from our colleagues becomes more pressing as specialization increases. Interdisciplinary work is no longer a luxury for a few especially ambitious or wide-ranging colleagues. The New Interdisciplinarity is the bread and butter of humanistic scholarship, and will change the way we structure knowledge in universities, journals, and professional associations. Such changes are inevitable, but they reflect the increasing vigor and excitement of humanistic scholarship. The challenge of the 1990's is to sustain that vigor and to convey more of that excitement to our students. If we succeed, we have every reason to feel confident about the future.
What I have to say has to do with the relation between theory, reading, research, and history. Those are my four key words. My presupposition is that the function of research in the humanities is not just to gather knowledge. Its goal is rather to facilitate readings in the broadest sense of the word, reading of literary texts, readings of the texts of popular culture, and readings of culture generally. The role of theory, I argue, is to facilitate reading. Theory is therefore praxis, not merely knowledge.

The present situation in the study of literature at least, and in the United States at least, is characterized by what I have elsewhere called the almost universal triumph of theory. This is true in spite of the continued active of presence of what Paul de Man called “the resistance to theory.” I suggest that, paradoxically, the most effective form of the resistance to theory these days, in fact at any time, is a certain form of the triumph of theory, a certain form of institutionalizing it.

But, first, what do I mean by the triumph of theory. I mean what is evident on every side, not only the development of a large number of powerful repeating theoretical discourses, each with its somewhat barbarous code name, hermeneutic, phenomenological, Lecanian, feminist, reader response, Marxist, Foucauldian, structuralist, semiotic, deconstructionist, new historicist, cultural-critical, and so on, but also the accompanying immense proliferation of courses, curricula, books, handbooks, dissertations, essays, lectures, new journals, symposia, study groups, centers, and institutes all overtly concerned with theory or with what are called cultural studies. These taken together form what Ralph Cohen calls “the hidden university,” a university crossing departmental, disciplinary, and even institutional boundaries — people working together from many different universities on some single problem. Much of the frontier work, in literary studies at least, is taking
place today in this hidden university. This is not the place to try to characterize each of the kinds of literary theory I have named. It takes Vincent Leitch a big book of over 400 pages to sketch out the main modes and their presuppositions. What needs to be stressed here is the large number of competing theories and their incoherence. They cannot be synthesized into some one grand all inclusive theory of literature.

The victory of theory has transformed the field of literary study from what it was when I entered it 40 years ago. In those happy days we mostly studied primary works, in the context of literary history, with some overt attention in our teaching to the basic presuppositions of the so-called new criticism — the primacy of metaphor, the universality of the principle of organic unity, and so on. Now it seems to be necessary to be acquainted with a large number of incompatible theories, each claiming exclusive allegiance. I sometimes feel sorry for my students who must read and be tested on all of these things for which I was not held accountable. What was pleasant and productive for me as a graduate student was that I could read theory on my own and make my own use of it. Reading Kenneth Burke or William Simpson was exciting, even slightly surreptitious because it was not something that was wholly approved of, not at least in the Harvard English Department of 1948–1952. Now it has been pretty thoroughly institutionalized.

Why the triumph of theory at this moment in our history? It is no doubt overdetermined. It has many incompatible “causes,” or, it might be better to say, “concomitant factors,” to try to avoid begging the question of priority by slipping in the word causes. Among those factors are those demographic changes that are making the United States more and more a multi-lingual country. This has been especially visible to me since my move from New England to California. The University of California in Irvine has now over one-third Asian-American students. So it makes less and less sense in such a university to base literary study exclusively on canonical works in English literature.

A second factor is the rise of the United States as a major world power, accompanied by a decline in the importance of England. This tends to reduce the cultural role for us of literature written in England, though that to say that is not to deny that Shakespeare is a very great
writer. But there is an inevitable change in the way we read Shakespeare because of the political change in the relation of the United States to England. A third factor: the Women's Movement has had and is having enormous effects on American culture, along with the study of what is usually called "minority literature." But "minority" does not seem the right word in a place like Irvine where so many of the students are not Caucasian. Finally, there are technological changes like the jet plane which can bring scholars and critics from all over the world together for a conference like this one. The effect on literary study of computers, tape recorders, and copying machines should not be underestimated. How often we read something now, not after it's published, but in xerox form long before it's published. Someone sends it to us in the general process of xerox dissemination. Essays are published or circulated in translation before they are even published in the original language. There has been a vast increase in the rapidity of translation in the humanities. These new devices have enormously speeded up the spread of new work from place to place within the United States from Europe and other continents to the United States and from the States out to the world. Since this work is transnational and often part of the work of the "hidden university," it is frequently "theoretical" in orientation.

But one of the most important factors associated with the turn to theory is its function as a response to a need generated by a widespread loss of confidence in the unequivocal value of studying primarily works in the traditional male dominated canon of English literature, plus Homer, Virgil, Dante, Cervantes, and so on, in English translation. That is the way it still was when I started the study of literature in 1944. There was no anxiety about the losses that might be involved in reading Homer, say, in the then archaic Lang, Leaf and Meyers translation, with its cadences and diction from the King James Bible. Also put in doubt has been the traditional justification for the study of the canon, that is, that such study transmits from the old to the young the fundamental values of our culture, the Arnoldian "best that has been known and thought in the world." It is not that defenses of the study of the traditional canon on these grounds are not currently being made, far from it, but they are likely being made in a way that makes their ideological motivation evident. Such defenses no longer go without saying. Our consciousnesses have been raised no doubt in
large part by the works of theory themselves. We are more likely to feel now that no choice of books for a syllabus, for example, or no choice of ways to read those books, is politically innocent. Such choices are no longer so easily to be justified by appeal to a universal consensus or by appeal to universal standards valid for any time, place, institution, or particular classroom. I think one has to teach the undergraduates at Irvine in a somewhat different way from the way one teaches the undergraduates at Yale — where I used to teach. The students in each university know different languages for one thing.

At the same time it is important to remember that recent empirical studies made by the Modern Language Association have shown that the traditional canon still overwhelmingly forms the backbone of the curricula of departments of English in most American colleges and universities. Study of canonical works has by no means been as much weakened as some critics of the teaching literature in our colleges and universities claim. Nevertheless, discussion of the justification of the canon is taking place. At the practical, curricular, and pedagogical level, however, the result is more a matter of new works and new approaches to canonical works being added to more traditionally organized courses than anything like a radical overturning of the received canon. A course of that sort that comes to my mind as an example is one taught this past year at Irvine by my colleague John Rowe. In one sense this was a perfectly traditional course in mid-19th century American literature. The students read Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Twain and so on. At the same time they read Harriet Beecher Stowe and other women writers of the time. Along with that was a reading of ancillary theoretical material. It is a radically different kind of course from any available to me at Oberlin or Harvard in the late '40's or early '50's. On the other hand it would not be accurate to describe it as a course that has abandoned the canon.

Moreover, in spite of all the attention being paid to the new forms of literary theory, it is still the case, as those studies made by the MLA have found, that an immense number, perhaps the majority, of courses in literature in the United States are still taught according to the methods and assumptions of the new criticism. One can rejoice at this or deplore it, but it seems to be the case.

The triumph of theory, then, is to a considerable degree to be defined as a response to the new social, demographic, and
The technological situation I have described and as an attempt to think one's way out of it. The teacher wants to be justified in what he or she does. The appeal to theory is one way of seeking that justification. To put this another way, one of the major functions of literary theory is as a critique of ideology, that is, of taking a linguistic reality for a material one. The ideology in question in this case includes the hidden (but ideology is by definition hidden) assumptions of our procedures of teaching literature and of the general institutionalizing of literary study.

The result of this new historical situation has been that more and more in the United States literary theory has become a subject of study for its own sake. The danger is that this may marginalize literary theory by making it simply another object of study like any other. The function of theory, as I began by affirming, is to facilitate readings. In that sense it is connected with research, since new readings are the fundamental products of research in literary study. Readings, in turn, have not simply a cognitive or epistemological function. They have a cultural, productive, or properly performative, function. Our real business as humanists is to make something happen in our culture.

Literary theory, that is to say, is of little or no use unless it is "applied," used. Theory must be active, productive. What theory performs is, or ought to be, new readings, in the broadest sense of that word. But these readings in their turn are active, rather than being merely passive or cognitive. They make something happen. The readings in question would of course include new readings of the works of theory. The readings of the works of theory, like those of "primary" texts, should be "readings" in a strong sense of that word, that is, critical or rhetorical readings, as opposed to interpretations of the manifest thematic content of the texts read. Theory is of no use unless it is "read" in this sense. Only then will it facilitate new readings of other texts, readings that are radically inaugural in the sense that they implicitly or explicitly propose a new "contract" or relation with the university and with the society or the state that university serves. In however minimal a way, a new reading of Moby Dick or of Uncle's Tom's Cabin changes the culture that reading enters.

But what I mean by "new readings" must not be misunderstood. I do not mean "new" in the sense of "determined by a new historical situation or political climate," nor do I mean "new" in the sense of "determined by new theoretical presuppositions," nor do I mean...
“new” in the sense a certain vulgar form of reader response criticism or vulgar misunderstanding of poststructural criticism generally takes such criticism to presuppose that the reader is free to make the text mean anything he or she wants it to mean. My conviction is that any valid reading is authorized only by the text read, the words on the page. This means that though theory may facilitate genuine reading, there is always a dissymmetry between theory and reading. This might be formulated by saying that reading is more likely to be the disconfirmation or severe modification of theory than its triumphant validation. What happens when we read happens by a necessity that displays the sovereign power of the text read over the reader. That sovereignty lies in the way the text in question gives the reader access to meanings otherwise inaccessible. But these are likely to be almost inexhaustibly complex, even in the case of an apparently short, simply, and straightforward poem, for example Wordworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal.” This means that each genuine act of reading is to some degree new, inaugural, even if we are reading something we have read, taught, or written about dozens of times before. The new reading uncovers hitherto unidentified aspects of the meanings to which the text in question gives the reader access. The function of literary study in the university, I have been arguing, is to make such new readings effective within our culture.