

THE  
TRANSFORMATION  
OF HUMANISTIC STUDIES  
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:  
Opportunities and Perils

Thomas Bender  
Stanley Chodorow  
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American Council of Learned Societies

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## Introduction

This Occasional Paper originated in a panel session at the 1997 ACLS Annual Meeting on “The Transformation of Humanistic Studies in the Twenty-first Century: Perils and Opportunities.” The contributors—Thomas Bender, Dean for Humanities and University Professor, New York University; Stanley Chodorow, Provost and Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania; and Pauline Yu, Dean of Humanities and Professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures, University of California, Los Angeles—were asked to address how current forces are reshaping humanistic studies today and what the shape and substance of humanistic studies might or could be in the future.

Their papers do indeed look to the future, but with an understanding of the historical development of the humanities in the university. As scholars, the authors appreciate the unlimited promise of humanistic learning for individuals, the general scholarly community, and the public. As senior university officials, they have acute—perhaps painfully acute—knowledge of the limited choices left to practical administrators. That they see more opportunities than perils facing the humanities should give the reader cause for optimism.





# Locality and Worldliness

Thomas Bender

*Dean for Humanities, New York University*

In these remarks on this perhaps impossible topic, I plan to make two moves that may seem counterintuitive. First, to speak about the future, I will turn to the past. Second, at a time of globalization and universal and instantaneous communication with the Internet, I will emphasize the importance of thinking about academe in local terms.

Since we soon mark a millennium as well as a century, I will address the future of academe in these two contexts. As we approach the new millennium, we are only about two hundred years from the millennium of the European university, as well. In the West, only the Roman Catholic Church has a longer continuous institutional history. And like the Catholic Church, the university has made a virtue out of its conservatism.

However frustrating such conservatism may be, one can argue that it sustained the university in hard times, and ensured the preservation of bodies of knowledge that later supported revitalizations. I refer especially to the early modern period, when urban universities drew upon the stimulus of vital city cultures in Edinburgh, Leiden, and Geneva to reform themselves. This earlier renovation of higher learning gives me confidence: perhaps there is a self-correcting mechanism in the university's relation to society, provided that the university is willing to engage its social surrounding.

This point is enforced by the example of the past century in the United States. The nineteenth century college, as Francis Wayland, then president of Brown, observed in the 1850s, had a product—a tired classical curriculum—that no one wished to buy.<sup>1</sup> It shared little of the dynamism of an America in transformation; Columbia College and New York University, both situated in burgeoning modern New York, had no more than one hundred students between them.

The dynamic society of the times invited engagement, but the college curriculum was trapped in formalism. A few years later, however, a generation of ambitious academics rethought higher education. Beginning with the founding of Johns Hopkins in 1876, or perhaps even with the selection of Charles W. Eliot as president of Harvard in 1869, there was a transformation—Richard Hofstadter called it a “revolution”—in American higher education.<sup>2</sup>

The university’s relation to society was renegotiated. It looked to new opportunities and assumed new responsibilities. The curriculum was modernized, and enrollments grew at a rate matched only by the increases of the past two decades. Novel institutional forms were devised, and new disciplines invented. In some ways, the founding of the American Economic Association in 1885 symbolizes the aspiration of these young academics committed to new disciplines. The academic culture we today know was invented then.

I have a strong sense that we are at a similar moment, but the conditions of society—and our relation to it—are quite different. If the perspective of a millennium draws our attention to continuity, the perspective of a century emphasizes the spirit of invention and the historical contingency of the current academic culture. Were we as bold as our predecessors, David Damrosch has recently observed, we might re-imagine the university.<sup>3</sup> Some of the disciplines invented a century ago may have exhausted their original charters, and we should be prepared to examine that issue. We might rethink both the form and content of our academic culture, asking of each discipline not whether it is “advancing,” but whether it helps us to describe and evaluate the world in which we live. I do not claim to be able to answer these questions, but I do know we cannot continue to dodge them.

The history of the past fifty years, at least as I read it, leaves us in a paradoxical situation. The American university has dramatically expanded and diversified its faculty and student body, while raising quality to a world standard. For all of its success, however, the university has fewer friends than it had in the immediate postwar years. A second paradox: the university is perceived as both central to our society and an alien presence. During the course of this half-century, academic culture has been allowed to cultivate itself in isolation. The culture of the academy has become removed from the concerns we share with others in our “life worlds,” to borrow a phrase from Jürgen Habermas.<sup>4</sup>

The university should not, of course, too easily accommodate itself to society. A certain friction is to be expected because of its commitment to the critical spirit. But I fear conflict less than I do irrelevance and isolation motivated by fear of conflict.

What is the point of contact between academe and contemporary society? What is the social location of academe? Beginning in France and Germany during the Napoleonic Wars, but especially after the Franco-Prussian War in Europe and the Civil War in the United States, academic culture became involved in the work of state-making. The United States, no less than Bismarck's Germany or Third Republic France, was creating a national society and a national culture. Scientific research and technical training represented major academic contributions to the making of modern nations. But the humanities played a role, too. They were supported by the nation, through state mechanisms in Europe and through philanthropy in the United States. In return, they were asked to create and sustain a national culture.

The modern humanities disciplines were born in alliance with the nation-state as cultivators of national culture and custodians of national history.<sup>5</sup> Humanists were not necessarily apologists of the state. Often, in fact, they were highly critical. Historians often prized their access to original documents in the state archives precisely because it gave them a critical position in society. Charles Beard's reliance on Treasury records to desecralize the Constitution is a particularly powerful example.<sup>6</sup> Still, such criticism often re-enforced disciplinary nationalism. The humanities disciplines at once sustained the national culture and depended upon it for a role in public life.

As the autonomy, even the conceptual clarity, of the nation-state and national culture today become more problematic, the humanities disciplines are losing a platform, a justification, that has served them for more than a century. Recent scholarly developments focusing on subgroups in society and on comparative and global perspectives further weaken the historic association of humanists and the nation. I do not necessarily lament these changes; I am not a nostalgic nationalist. But the ground is shifting beneath us, and we are not paying sufficient attention. I welcome redefinition, but I am uncomfortable with complacent inattention.

We must rethink our relation to the nation and other social units. Our late-nineteenth century predecessors established their relation to society at the national level and developed national disciplines and, eventually, a national system of higher learning. We need to interrogate that model. Those who predict that the nation is about to disappear are clearly wrong, but the global and the local have significantly gained on the national. We must address this fact. The context for humanistic scholarship in the next century will be at once local, national, *and* global. The humanities will make their connection to society at the local level, but this local focus will be inherently cosmopolitan, made so in part by the movement of peoples and ideas on a global scale.

Emerson once referred to the “double consciousness” of the scholar, who lives at once in the world of ideas that transcend time and place, and also in a family and a locality, sharing the same concerns with neighbors from all walks of life.<sup>7</sup> Much later, John Dewey, who seems to have understood this point, sought to bring these two levels of consciousness into active relation with each other to stimulate the mind and to promote the improvement of society. Although he never developed this notion fully, he proposed in *The Public and Its Problems* that intellect and politics meet in the domain of the local.<sup>8</sup>

Dewey argued, most notably in *Experience and Nature*, that the scholar must begin with the ordinary life experiences he or she shares with others. From that point, the scholar moves into the world of disciplinary knowledge, only to return to local life for further dialogue. The special contribution of scholarship to this public conversation is its access to a refined and severe method of thought. In evaluating the worth of a scholar’s participation in such dialogues, Dewey proposed the following test. Does the scholar’s special knowledge, when “referred back to ordinary life-experiences . . . render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful? Or does it terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque?”<sup>9</sup>

Dewey’s vision of academic knowledge is activist. He would have us look around ourselves for interesting objects of inquiry and repair, as he himself did in fields ranging from elementary education, to international conflicts, to organization of workers, to the justice of Stalin’s condemnation of Trotsky. But, contrary to Hofstadter’s critique, Dewey does not reduce intellect to activism.<sup>10</sup> No philosopher of education placed intrinsic interest closer to the center of a theory of human thinking. Moreover, to engage social life, as Dewey’s example reveals, one must confront fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of knowledge and the foundation of rights.

We work too hard to keep the world around us at bay. Especially for those of us affiliated with urban institutions, our local world is larger than we think: around us are sources of moral insight and energy, wonderfully complex intellectual problems, and communities of non-academic talent with whom we might well collaborate. Interaction between the two domains of Emersonian consciousness—the world of ideas and the world of quotidian existence—stimulates new thinking within disciplines. But our sense of autonomy and superiority works against us.

I might note here that the UCLA literary critic Samuel Weber, working from the perspective of the “virtualization” of the university, arrives at a similar critique of the academic organization of “sovereign ‘fields’” separated from a pragmatic “understanding of the world in which [students] must not merely work but also live.”<sup>11</sup>

Since we are in Philadelphia, I mention the fascinating project developed some years ago by the Classics Department at Penn. In collaboration with a West Philadelphia community development corporation, they organized a community-based course on the nature of political society. It provided a clarifying perspective on the nature of the polis, as it promoted fresh thinking about contemporary urban politics. It represented neither a corruption of the discipline, nor a crudely simplified popularization of humanistic knowledge. It exemplified the vitality of the bodies of knowledge universities preserve, expand, refine, and periodically return to society.

I will devote my remaining time to the brief development of three themes that derive from the orientation I have set forth. I have rubrics for them: first, *From Excellence to Distinction*; second, *From Nationalism to Multiculturalism*; and third, *From Academic Knowledge to Democratic Knowledge*.

### 1. *From Excellence to Distinction*

In a recent, provocative, and aptly titled book, *The University in Ruins*, the late Bill Readings deplored the ubiquity of “excellence” in the discourse of higher education. Fifteen years ago, “excellence” was a neo-conservative code word meant to suggest the weakness of new fields and of scholars marked by more diverse origins and different professional styles. Later, Readings complained, “excellence” came to be used in university promotion in a meaningless way.<sup>12</sup> Excellence today has become a slogan, not a focused vision. There is no distinctive meaning or ambition implied in this term. Aspiration is thereby reduced to the national rankings in *U.S. News and World Report* or the SAT scores of incoming classes. These markers are not without merit, but they are limited: they refer to no articulated educational purpose, but only to market competition. The result is a narrow sameness among institutions.

Back in 1968, David Reisman and Christopher Jencks published *The Academic Revolution*. Despite the conjuncture of title and moment, it was not about student activism. It was a critique of the growing uniformity of aspiration in higher education. Higher education had been marked by more institutional and curricular variation before the war than after. Institutions, ambitious but averse to risk, looked to a national template, committing themselves to mimicry rather than local invention. Reisman and Jencks lamented the absence of vision, imagination, and local distinction.<sup>13</sup> Matters have gone from bad to worse since 1968. In a remarkably diverse society—

sending the most diverse body of students to college in history—we have so very few distinctive institutions, in terms of curriculum, finances, or organizational structure.

Focusing on “distinction” rather than “excellence” will be helpful. Distinction implies not only standing but also special content. And I think the most promising approach to distinction involves connecting to the local, developing local opportunities. Yet we too often fear the local. We want to be able to market ourselves and draw students from as wide a pool as possible.

Our new global society would seem to encourage this translocal point of view, but I think in fact that it invites the opposite. Worldliness encourages an awareness of the multiplicity of cultures and knowledge bodies; Clifford Geertz’s essays on *Local Knowledge*, published in 1983, have become more, not less, pertinent.<sup>14</sup> One must enter the global society from a particular place, and with a distinctive outlook. We must preserve the history and knowledge of those places where layers of culture have been deposited. Otherwise, the ever-expanding market will dissolve culture completely, and the humanities will find themselves out of business in quick order.

Again: our nineteenth century precursors provide a useful model. They created a national system of universities, libraries, and museums largely to defend against a market model of culture, morality, and politics. The trick, as they knew, was and is both to engage and to regulate the market. The intellectual traditions of the humanities are a bulwark against the total commercialization of culture, but humanists must follow a policy of constructive engagement: what Michael Walzer calls “connected criticism,” rather than isolation.<sup>15</sup> And it is on the local terrain that academic culture must renegotiate its relation to society, seeking always local distinction.

## *2. From Nationalism to Multiculturalism*

If the humanities are to contribute to the creation of a multicultural tradition of art and learning, they will most likely achieve this goal locally, where knowledge and experience can intermingle. The invention of the modern nation involved notions of firm boundaries, administrative uniformity, and social homogeneity (none of which is characteristic of empires). I do not propose a new imperialism, but a new metropolitanism does appear to be coming into its own at this time. Cities and regions today probably play a larger role in world history than at any time since the early modern period in the West; unlike nations, they have always represented centers of diversity.

To consider the notion of new cultures built by immigrants and previously oppressed groups is very threatening in the context of national

identities. Yet if we think of metropolises, instead of nations, as the key units of society and culture, the prospect of diversity is less threatening. Cities have always been cosmopolitan, and they have always redefined their culture through inclusion. It is worth recalling that the great achievements that made New York City an international capital of culture after World War II depended upon an explicit decision by artists—including several of the abstract expressionists, musicians, George Balanchine, and Martha Graham—to forego representing the nation, focusing instead on capturing the culture of the city. The same can be said of many different forms of popular culture.<sup>16</sup>

By focusing academic culture on the metropolis instead of on national cultures in which universities are deeply implicated, one might thereby hasten the creation of the pluralized public culture that must emerge in the coming generation—not only in the United States, but in every open, democratic society. The metropolis is a plausible site for constructing the sense of a global culture needed to support the cosmopolitanism proposed by Martha Nussbaum and others in a recent symposium in *The Boston Review*. The world economy and culture, it seems, are increasingly organized around a network of international cities. The emerging global culture has some resemblance to the eighteenth century cosmopolitan republic of letters, an ideal inherited by the modern university. Today's cosmopolitanism, however, extends more deeply into the social body. The pluralized culture of the university resembles the complex life of contemporary immigrants neighborhoods. Residents live at once in place-specific urban neighborhoods and in diasporic networks that are not unlike the disciplinary channels that organize academic communications and work across space. Out of this common experience, widely shared in the life of the contemporary metropolis, a worldly humanistic culture well might emerge.

### 3. *From Academic Knowledge to Democratic Knowledge*

If humanistic scholarship is to contribute as much as possible to these changes, a new relationship to the multiple places of knowledge in the metropolis will be necessary. Academics will always need to acknowledge the legitimacy, if not necessarily the sufficiency, of the vernacular or local language of social and cultural definition. We must be intellectually ambidextrous. As John Bates Clark was developing the theory of marginal economics at the turn of the century, he was locating his work within a popular discursive framework that referred not to disciplinary agendas or theories but to such commonplace issues as “city problems,” “the labor question,” and the “social question.”<sup>17</sup> Only later did economics close itself off from such public discourse.

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.

Our hubris goes back to Plato’s academy; whatever our opinion of Plato, we seem all to have absorbed his disdain for vernacular knowledge, the common and discursive knowledge of a place. We must have the courage to follow the distinguished political scientist, Charles Lindblom, who has made a good case for the limits of academic knowledge and the intelligence of democracy.<sup>18</sup> To forego local knowledge, the knowledge produced by diverse sources in diverse sites, is to limit both our creativity and our usefulness. Protecting narrow (and comforting) boundaries for academic pursuits brings with it the risk of losing a significant voice in contemporary accounts of nature, society, and culture. Alternative, not-for-profit sites for knowledge-making are being developed to assemble vital knowledge not being produced by universities. Research and advocacy groups are undermining the university’s presumed monopoly on authoritative knowledge.

Fascinating research recently reported by an international team of sociologists in *The New Production of Knowledge* (1994) argues that more and more knowledge will be developed outside of universities, in opportunistic and transdisciplinary settings. The intellectual style in these places is different from that associated with the university. Theory is much closer to the point of use than is the case of university-based knowledge, and that interplay, even near assimilation, of theory and practice may be a source of both vitality and invention. The process of making knowledge coincides with the process of dissemination, thus dissolving the old categorical distinction between production and popularization, theory and practice.<sup>19</sup> If academics are to engage this developing intellectual milieu, they will do so locally or not at all.

If we academics disdain such work, we not only risk marginalization, but also cut ourselves off from a needed stimulus. We must acknowledge the inherent value of multiple sites and styles of knowledge production. That implies a continual renegotiation of our relation to our society and to that society’s many and diverse habitats of knowledge. In making this assertion, 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. Creativity depends upon interaction among many different approaches. I am convinced that our work can be carried out best by acknowledging the placeness of intellect and the fruitfulness of Emerson’s notion of the intellectual’s “double consciousness.”



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Francis Wayland, *Thoughts on the Present Collegiate System in the United States* (1842), excerpted in *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, eds. Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith (2 vols; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) I, 371-72.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hofstadter, "The Revolution in Higher Education," *Paths of American Thought*, eds. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Morton White (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963) 269-90.

<sup>3</sup> David Damrosch, *We Academics: Changing the Culture of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* (2 vols.; Boston: Beacon, 1985) II, 113-98.

<sup>5</sup> What follows draws upon but does not precisely follow Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

<sup>7</sup> Cited in R. Jackson Wilson, *In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States, 1860-1920* (New York: Oxford, 1970) 28.

<sup>8</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927; Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1929) 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963) part V.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Weber, "The Future of the University: The Cutting Edge," *Ideas of the University*, ed. Terry Smith (Sydney: University of Sydney, Research Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 1996) 62-63.

<sup>12</sup> Readings, chap. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Jencks and David Reisman, *The Academic Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968). The argument is threaded through the book, but in summary form it may be found in chapter one.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> See Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> See Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York: Knopf, 1987) 335.

<sup>17</sup> On Clark and his generation of economists, see Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 98-122.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Lindblom, *Inquiry and Change: The Troubled Attempt to Understand and Shape Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Gibbons, Camille Limoges, Helga Nowotny, Simon Schwartzman, Peter Scott, and Martin Trow, *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1994).

# Taking the Humanities Off Life Support

Stanley Chodorow

*Provost, University of Pennsylvania*

Humanists are caught up in a culture of complaint. The media make fun of our interests and our language. The religious right treats us as heretics, the hated secular humanists. Elected representatives agree with our critics and view our work as frivolous or outrageous; they have reduced funding of our work to a shadow of its former self. Students, encouraged by their parents, have abandoned us for the practical arts. Deans and provosts have noticed these trends. Our ranks are thinning. Our graduate students are driving taxis or, worse, taking law degrees. Woe is us.

The situation of the humanities also reflects their place among the liberal arts. In the Middle Ages, the arts numbered seven—among them grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic (logic), the sources of the modern humanities. As the arts developed, each at its own pace and in its own direction, the relationships among them changed and became a matter of debate. In the modern university, this debate has been amplified by competition for space in the curriculum.

The endemic conflict over the curriculum is, basically, a struggle to maintain the size and centrality of our academic community and to control the content of our programs. Mixed up in the debate over the material circumstances of the humanities is also an ambivalence about the purposes of education, whether it is preparation for a career or formation of the educated (read *improved*) individual.

I will argue today that the sources of the uncertainty and of the consequent malaise of academic humanists are to be found in the history of democracy, religion, and education. The humanities have accumulated a confusion of purposes, so that every critic and defender of our studies has some right on his or her side.

The Western humanities—the version of the disciplines now embedded in the university—acquired their first goal when Socrates invented philosophy as a rational foundation for civic discourse in the polis. In the complex society of classical Athens, the ancient tribal basis of the community was not a sufficient basis for politics; Socrates attempted to construct a new, rational basis. The Athenians were not persuaded, and in the aftermath of the execution of Socrates, his disciple Plato steered philosophy into an anti-democratic course. But the relationship of philosophy to civic culture had been established. Roman education inherited the Athenian tradition.

During the early Middle Ages, the humanities—now expanded to include grammar and rhetoric—flourished in a different context. Monasticism began as a way of life separated from worldly affairs and family relations, intended to give monks the greatest opportunity to get into heaven. In time, monastic thinkers came to view a direct experience of the divine as possible even in this life, and they made this mystical experience a principal goal of their program. What we call humanistic education became a component of the contemplative life that led monks to the knowledge and experience of God.

For the monks, education formed the character, preparing the person for the mystical experience and for heaven. Learning was *not* acquired to gain an advantage in this world. From the tenth to the twelfth century, monastic schools were the most important educational institutions in Europe.

In the late twelfth century, the monastic tradition of learning was challenged by a new rationalist movement embodied in the university. The humanities became part of this movement, joining such practical professions as law, medicine, and theology.

The university originated in the cathedral schools, which educated young men for the clergy. The education provided in the cathedrals was similar in content to the monastic curriculum, but it had a completely different purpose. It was education for worldly work rather than for the soul. In and around the cathedral schools the intellectual revolution occurred that brought rational discourse back to the fore and led to the foundation of the university.

The revolution began just before the turn of the twelfth century, when a Breton philosopher, Peter Abelard, developed a rational method for the acquisition of knowledge based on Aristotle's logic.<sup>1</sup> Students flocked to Paris, where Abelard gave his lectures. Learning the techniques of grammar, rhetoric, and logic and applying them to law, medicine, philosophy, and human affairs became the rage.

Where there were flocks of students, there was money to be made in teaching, and teaching masters soon found their way to Paris. By the middle of the twelfth century, there were dozens of teachers and thousands of students crowding the city, and by the 1180s, the teaching masters there had formed a guild—the *universitas*—that would be the seed of the modern university.<sup>2</sup>

The university was a craft guild, with the form and function of other craft guilds. Like other guilds, the university organized and regulated the business of the teaching masters in the city. The teaching masters who belonged to the university made and sold knowledge. They made knowledge by applying logical analysis to the classic texts in grammar, philosophy, theology, medicine, and law. They sold this knowledge to students who came to the city to hear lectures and to get tutorial assistance. The purpose of the university was thoroughly commercial; education had become an economic activity.

These two views of learning—the monastic and the scholastic—were fundamentally different. The university masters treated knowledge and intellectual techniques as commodities. The monks viewed knowledge as an acquired personal trait, a way to the mystical experience. In their view, knowledge crafted by human means, by unaided reason, could not by itself lead to God; it was more likely to lead to the devil. The monks opposed Peter Abelard and convinced the Church to condemn him—twice—and the papacy periodically fulminated against the rationalist discourse carried out in the universities' classrooms.

It is one of the ironies of history that these two strongly opposed approaches to knowledge grew together in the university. The amalgamation of the two traditions occurred primarily because students came to the medieval university very young. They needed upbringing as well as instruction. For young students, the formation of character, which was one of the principal purposes of monastic education, was as important as the acquisition of advanced intellectual skills.

In the mid-thirteenth century, Robert de Sorbonne in Paris and John Balliol in Oxford established the first residential colleges to provide this kind of formation; other benefactors followed their examples. The colleges were separate from the university, secular counterparts of the monastic school. By the end of the Middle Ages, the colleges had become the dominant feature of the universities.

The initial impulse of the university—the idea that knowledge acquired by rational processes had economic value—provided humanists with gainful employment. The university was and remains a knowledge factory, and the humanities have from the beginning occupied a large part of the shop floor. But even in the earliest years of the institution, there were voices

of concern. John of Salisbury, a leading intellectual of the mid-twelfth century, complained that his students were interested only in lucrative careers. (He also complained about their reading and writing skills.) The absorption of the monastic idea of education into the university increased this dissonance. We humanists have never felt that the university's commercial enterprise provided a fully satisfying and completely honest purpose for the humanistic disciplines.

The establishment of the American experiment in the late eighteenth century added to the confusion of our purposes by recreating the political environment for the revival of the civic humanities. The reinvention of electoral politics raised the question of how political issues should be resolved and once again gave the humanities a civic purpose.

The multiple purposes of the humanities have produced both the challenges and the defenses invoked in contemporary discourse about these disciplines. The marriage of the humanities to the professions in the university represented a commitment to the market for knowledge. The civic and moral purposes of education have provided a defense of investment in the humanities, though they also make the humanities curriculum a battleground.

Nonetheless, though we are concerned about external and internal controversies in the humanities, most of us would say that the greatest challenge facing them is a bad market. In the past twenty-five years, the business of the humanities has been undermined by the phenomenal growth of the social sciences and of technology. Both competitors represent the triumph of the quick over the slow. The social sciences promise a shortcut to understanding of the human condition and the nature of human affairs through the application of theory, while technology allows the young to succeed quickly. The social sciences and new technologies, with their myriad business applications, are fields for precocious accomplishment and bring immediate economic rewards. In the technological economy, wisdom and judgment—the hard-won products of humanistic studies and long experience in human affairs—are not prerequisites for economic success. Students fail to understand why they should prepare themselves for “leadership,” an ill-defined goal, by devoting time to the humanities.

The decline in the humanities market—indicated by declining enrollments in courses and programs, declining royalties from textbooks, and the reluctance of presses to publish specialized monographs—has produced

a great deal of complaint and recrimination directed at provosts and deans who have responded to market conditions by reducing the size of departments, the funding for graduate students, and other resources. These complaints usually relate to the argument that the humanities are the repository of our civilization and must be protected in spite of—indeed, because of—the bad market for their teaching and scholarship. In a society dominated by economic goals, humanists argue that the propagation of civilization through their work is more critical than ever.

Accepting this kind of argument is not part of the job description of most provosts and deans. But I am a humanist, and John of Salisbury's plaint is mine. The university is more than a commercial enterprise. My personal experience confirms this view, as the following anecdote demonstrates.

In my previous life at the University of California, San Diego, I was asked by a group of astrophysicists to help them construct the institutional framework for a Center for Astrophysics and Space Sciences. I eventually became chair of the Center's board. In 1980, when the Pioneer spacecraft passed beyond the confines of our solar system, the local media came to campus to interview scientists about this noteworthy event.

The scientists responded, "Ask Chodorow." For astrophysicists, the boundary of the solar system is an arbitrary and imaginary line produced by a calculation of the sun's gravitational pull. That's not an answer the general public understands. I found myself in front of the cameras talking about . . . well, you can imagine.

This little story demonstrates the need for the humanities in the face of a contrary market. The humanities not only produce and teach a kind of knowledge "for sale"; they also deal with the meaning of things. The humanities are the means to explore and understand human nature and the products of human intelligence. Indirectly, by talking about the meaning of Pioneer's passage, I gave a rationally founded reason for public support of space exploration, while offering an implied analysis of why the event raised questions about the place of human beings in the universe.

Yet, as I noted earlier, we who wish to defend the humanities by weighing such immeasurables as political and spiritual ideals against the market valuation produced by the competitive processes of the university must struggle with two serious weaknesses in our position. First, arguing from values puts the humanities into a public arena of debate. All members of the community have a right to participate in this arena. If education in the humanities serves a civic or spiritual purpose, why should the community allow an undemocratic institution like the university decide what the form and content of that education should be? *Pace* Socrates, it has never been

established that philosophical analysis is the best basis for civic discourse. In the United States, even the constitutional prohibition of the establishment of religion has not quieted the claim that our community is based on religious belief. Much of the conflict over the humanities curriculum arises from the contention that our society can be preserved only through a shared historical point of view and common cultural values.<sup>3</sup>

Second, civic and economic values are not commensurable. While commercial judgments are not formulaic—they always contain non-quantifiable assessments of risk and one's ability to overcome unforeseen obstacles—they do produce measurable results. What are the rational foundations of value judgments and how does one weigh such judgments against economic valuations in determining how to use the marginal resources of the university? I do not know the answers to these questions. I do know that anecdotes like mine are not a firm foundation on which to make decisions about the size of the faculty in the departments of history, philosophy, and so on.

I take these challenges to academic freedom and to the economy of our fields very seriously, for we work in this world—in this society—and our work is shaped by worldly and societal forces. It surprises me to conclude that among those forces market pressures may be the most benign. The irony of our situation is that the independence of academic humanists may depend primarily on the university's commercial system. People, companies, or guilds that sell things ultimately make the judgments about which products to put on the shelves. This kind of independence is not without limits—only independent wealth produces complete freedom—but it may be the best that working people can hope to attain.

In conclusion, where does this analysis of our situation lead us? An advertising campaign during the half-time of the Superbowl and door prizes for those who enroll in humanities courses come to mind. As one concerned with the broader context of the crisis of the humanities—because I have to make decisions about the allocation of resources among all disciplines as well as deal with those outside the university who take an interest in our doings—I propose that we take advantage of what the market can do for our scholarship and teaching. We need to review our products and the way we advertise them. We need to study our market. I am convinced, as I stated earlier, that a robust market for the humanities is the best guarantor of both the critical mass of scholars in these fields and their independence to decide what they want to study. Finally, if we wish to reassert the moral and civic functions of humanistic study, we must accept the burden of moral authority.



Here, then, is my proposal. First, humanists should produce courses and programs that attract students. One part of this task is to take note of who our students actually are. Louis Menand made this point well in a recent article in *The New York Times Magazine*.<sup>4</sup> He noted that nearly a quarter of our students are over thirty. The curriculum we offer such students must differ from the one offered to 18- to 22-year-olds, who now constitute less than half of all undergraduates. Older students bring significant life experience to their studies, and their thinking about the questions we raise often has an immediate effect on their own lives and on the community. Older students demand that we speak to their issues, rather than to our own.

Second, humanities programs should become more of a collective enterprise than they are now. If you look across the humanistic disciplines in the contemporary university, you'll see some phenomenally successful programs—such as history and English—and many struggling ones. The preservation of intellectual diversity in the humanities requires an increase in the cooperation among fields. In short, all members of humanities departments need to find ways to support their specialized work through participation in programs and courses that are popular among students. Programs in cultural history that take advantage of specialists in literature, history, and other fields might give a wide range of humanists gainful employment, so that they can pursue their research and teaching in those areas in which students are rare animals.

Third, we should recruit new students, especially people in mid-career. These students will come to our programs because they understand that humanistic education is the foundation of leadership; they are already at the point in their careers where leadership is an attainable goal. We have not marketed the humanities as education for leadership; I think we should start doing so and should develop programs that give an education for that purpose.

Fourth, we need to engage the professions. At Penn, humanists in area studies programs are working with physicians, dentists, and nurses in collaborative projects abroad and at home; all of the participants are learning a great deal. We are also creating an academic initiative on American and comparative democratic and legal institutions that will unite humanists, social scientists, and lawyers. These first steps must lead to what Dean Colin Diver of our law school has called the “usable” humanities. I see this as a life-giving move. It has the potential to increase our enrollments and to draw us into intellectual work that will have wide influence in the society.

Fifth, we need to expand the types of graduate programs we offer. We must still train our successors in the profession—I am a strong supporter

of the traditional Ph.D. program—but we must create other graduate programs for people who do not want to follow us into the libraries and archives. Many of these programs will represent collaborative efforts with faculty in other fields. In particular, we need to persuade professional schools that we have something to offer their students. But we will not succeed in these projects unless we design courses that meet the needs of the other programs, their faculties, and their students.

**A**t stake is the size and intellectual wealth of the community of humanists. I am calling for measures that require us to recognize the market situation we are in and to take advantage of the commercial potential of our activities. We are at the end of a brief historical period when the economic success of the humanities produced hundreds of doctoral programs and permitted humanists to do during the day what they also did in the evening—concentrate on a specialty. That period has been over for some time now; it is time we noticed. If we continue to send up prayers for the world we want instead of dealing with the one we've got, we'll soon be but a holy, and an elderly, remnant.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The origins of the intellectual and artistic revolution of the twelfth century were much more complex than I indicate here. See Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927; New York, Meridian Books, 1957) and Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, eds., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Around the same time, or perhaps a little earlier, a university was founded in Bologna. But while the university in Paris was formed by masters, the one in Bologna was created by students. In Bologna, the main subjects were medicine and law, and the students in those fields were older than those who came to study arts. Indeed, most students had spent many years studying the arts before going into medicine or law. In Bologna, the mature students seized the initiative in creating the guild. Teaching masters often found this arrangement troublesome: a master had to post bond if he wished to leave the city during term, and he might be fined for failure to complete the announced curriculum of a course. The masters had a natural advantage, however, and it was the Parisian form of the university that prevailed.

<sup>3</sup>The question of how to assert the moral role and standing of faculty, particularly humanists, is the subject of a different essay. Claims to moral standing occupy highly contested ground; vociferous competing claims come from religious leaders and advocates of parental authority. Here, I will say only that to make such a claim, faculty would have to manage their behavior and image in ways that might conflict with the traditional academic values of intellectual freedom and tolerance for eccentricity. Moral authority comes with a backpack full of heavy constraints.

<sup>4</sup>Louis Menand, "Everybody Else's College Education," *The New York Times Magazine* 20 April 1997: 48-49.



# The Course of the Particulars: Humanities in the University of the Twenty-first Century<sup>1</sup>

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Like the other participants in this public session, I have been at different moments witness, victim, and agent of some of the many transformations that have swept through universities in this last decade of the twentieth century, changes that many programs in the humanities have found rather unsettling. The national context for these developments has been of great concern to us all, but let me begin, for the sake of example, with the local instance I have come to know best.

When I moved to UCLA in January 1994 as Dean of Humanities, I think it is fair to say that the outlook for the division was less than promising. The University of California was about to enter its fourth successive phase of budget cutting, a process that was to reduce by 25 percent its total support from the state. In the College of Letters and Science at UCLA, the humanities seemed an increasingly likely site for massive, targeted reductions. Student credit hours, student-faculty ratios, and numbers of majors had either flattened out or fallen, while those in the social and biological sciences had by contrast begun a steep upward trajectory. Faculty appointments in the twenty-five humanities departments and interdepartmental programs had remained relatively stable in both numbers and profile. By contrast, strategic and aggressive recruiting during the boom years of the late 1980s in the social sciences in particular had dramatically enhanced the national distinction of that division, which—burdened by the crush of students hoping for success in business or law or forced to abandon their aspirations for careers in the health sciences (organic chemistry can do that)—could only eye with increasing impatience the enviably small classes taught by their colleagues in the humanities.

Surely there was “fat” to be trimmed in my division. For example, did we really need to teach almost a hundred different languages, only half of which are spoken in the contemporary world, and all of which are labor intensive? Couldn’t writing instruction be delivered in a more cost-effective manner than in classes requiring one teacher for every twenty-five students? (Never mind that the National Council of Teachers of English doesn’t think it works with more than fifteen in a class.) Was it really necessary to maintain two dozen discrete units, some so small, it must be admitted, that they were virtually dysfunctional both administratively and interpersonally and thus generated (by my unofficial count) the highest per capita number of grievances against each other in the College? (Little did I know that my experience as the mother of three squabbling children would prove so useful in this new position.) There were rumors that at least 10 percent of humanities’ faculty positions would be transferred into the social sciences because of enrollment imbalances, and there was the fact that the writing staff alone had already been cut by 40 percent as a consequence of previous budget reductions. And I was advised to prepare myself for the privilege of implementing the highest percentage cut to be inflicted on any division in the College in the fourth phase of reductions at UCLA.

I knew all this, accepted the position nonetheless, and started work in January 1994. Ten days later the Northridge earthquake struck southern California and rendered Royce Hall, a campus landmark and home to more than a quarter of the division’s units, uninhabitable, forcing the seventy evacuated faculty and twenty staff members into a multi-year migratory exile not scheduled to end until sometime in 1998. An extremely attractive early retirement program that spring enticed thirty-one senior faculty to explore other opportunities, and leaving many of those slots unfilled brought us two-thirds of the way towards our savings target. The remainder could come only out of staff savings—budgets which had already been severely depleted. In the end, it became clear that I could implement the additional necessary cuts only by consolidating our twenty-five administrative units into twelve—pooling services while leaving academic affairs separate and intact. This was not, to say the least, a popular decision.

Conditions have improved since those dark and brutally dislocating days. At press time, the University of California is in the fourth year of a four-year compact with the governor that has guaranteed relatively stable funding—at the price, however, of what we have been told to think of as “productivity enhancements” amounting to ten million dollars. Through creative financing and smoke and mirrors we have begun to rebuild our faculty and improve the infrastructural support for

both teaching and research. In 1989, for example, the Division of Humanities' investment in computer technology was only half that of the physical sciences'; now it is exactly the same. Websites for both courses and professors, virtual office hours, multimedia classrooms and labs, and digitized teaching materials have become fixtures of our curricular landscape, as well. Nonetheless, to say that the humanities at UCLA have felt beleaguered, besieged, and beaten up over the past few years or so is, perhaps, to belabor the obvious.

The physical and fiscal travails of the division reflect, of course, larger challenges within both higher education and humanistic discourse in general. Rising costs for private institutions have generally not been supported by commensurate increases in the numbers of students willing or able to pay the necessarily escalating tuitions; to my knowledge, for example, applications for fall 1997 dropped off at all of the Ivy League colleges except Columbia. Similarly, we know that a public institution like the University of California can be accurately described as state-assisted, rather than state-supported, given its claim on a mere 4.4 percent of the state budget. UCLA's portion of that allocation represents a scant 23 percent of its annual expenditures. Meanwhile, we have been warned that "Tidal Wave II," fully equal in force to the influx of baby boomers that inundated institutions of higher learning in the decade from 1965 to 1975, will soon descend upon us, bringing a projected half-million new students into the system by the year 2005.

The citizens of the state, however, according to a recent survey from the California Higher Education Policy Center, do not consider this a crisis that would justify such solutions as placing limits on the numbers of students we can admit or raising fees (from what is considered the exorbitant sum of about \$4,000 for state residents). Rather, they expect us to make more efficient use of existing resources: maybe we can get a grant somewhere to build the tenth campus we need for the University of California, they suggest helpfully, or faculty can teach more classes, and administrators work more and spend less. One respondent commented, for example, that after retiring from her forty-hour-a-week job, she had enrolled in a program at a community college where "teachers only teach twenty hours a week. To me that is a gravy job." Another noted that "There is a lot of paper shuffling going on in the university, and a lot of memos flying back and forth, and not much getting done. It doesn't make sense to me."<sup>2</sup>

If the infrastructural complexity of institutions of higher learning doesn't make sense to our prospective clientele (or, at times, to us), still less comprehensible may be the arguments we conduct among ourselves about what it is we are trying to do and whether or not it is of value. Consider the challenges that we all confront, far beyond the familiar ones having to

do with saving lives and creating jobs: the profound demographic pressures created by sheer growth of population and enhanced ethnic and cultural diversity of the state; the increasingly complex problem of human interaction with the environment; the issues and opportunities associated with the advance of technology, particularly computer and electronic technology; and the basic problem of trying to figure out how we can all get along. Do our publics grasp the central role played by the humanities in exploring, inculcating, and perfecting the broader understanding of culture—and cultures—that might advance the understanding of these problems and help create solutions for them? Do they recognize that it is we who teach “the ability to express oneself clearly and accurately; the skill of critical evaluation, both of ideas and actions; the courage to make choices based on shared values and priorities; the opportunity to conduct an intensive conversation with the traditions, present and past, that help make us who we are, and above all who we will be; and as a result, the ability to understand and make sense of other people and their cultures”<sup>3</sup> To embrace the wisdom of imparting these skills is not, I think, to pander to some purely instrumental notion of the value of a liberal education. They lie at the heart of the mission of the humanities. But how broadly shared is this recognition? Not only have the humanities been marginalized on public registers of utility, but there is, after all, a long history within humanistic discourse itself affirming the importance of preserving that very disinterestedness, that wish to insulate humanistic study from the conditions of the marketplace altogether.

Who among us needs to be reminded, furthermore, that the very critical faculties humanists seek to develop have led them first of all to question the terms they employ and the subjects they study? Assaults on the core curriculum, on the constructedness of the literary canon, and on the centrality and stability of an integrated, centered, and autonomous self have not been waged, after all, from the outside. Rather, debates over particular inclusions or exclusions from reading lists—that, in David Damrosch’s words, “amount to little more than the replacement of a few deck chairs as general education continues slowly, majestically, to sink out of sight”<sup>4</sup> and expose thereby the possible hollowness of the core—only serve to make those who might otherwise like to preserve it truly uncomfortable, if not downright suspicious. Yes, as a recent article in *The Los Angeles Times* revealed, many English departments—though not UCLA’s—have eliminated Chaucer and Milton from their reading lists and it has even become thinkable not to be required to read Shakespeare, too.<sup>5</sup> I think that these questions should always be thinkable, and that



the impulse to rethink is precisely what makes contemporary humanistic discourse so powerful.

One of my former colleagues argued a few years ago that we don't need to create challenges to the traditional European canon by including noncanonical material on reading lists since—in the right hands—the classics manage to deconstruct themselves quite nicely on their own. I find certain implications of this position troubling, for as a sometime scholar of classical Chinese poetry in a Western institutional context I have collected more than my share of anecdotes illustrating the reach of Eurocentrism. A well-known American interpreter of Western critical theory, for example, was asked to review for publication a recent comparative work on poetry written by one of my colleagues. This book happens to span numerous cultural and temporal boundaries, including those of China. While the reviewer did submit a positive recommendation to the press, when he happened shortly thereafter to meet the author of the volume, an eminent scholar of Chinese literature, he confided, with absolutely unabashed candor over dinner, that he had enjoyed the book very much but had of course “skipped all the Chinese stuff.” And on another occasion, shortly after I moved to California from New York a few years ago, one of my new colleagues, another influential theorist and native of France, remarked to me at a party that I must miss New York very much. Now, I did happen to harbor many regrets about the move, but being a bit curious as to what lay behind his comment, I responded by asking him why he should think that that might be the case. He replied, “Because you're now so much farther away from China.”

Needless to say, this was not the answer I expected. I'll refrain from unpacking the various presumptions implicated in that radically disoriented response—postmodern geography at its best. Someone who measures the distance between California and China by way of Western Europe is all too likely, I fear, to do the same discursively, as well. But while distances, like differences, may have shrunk, we must not allow them to disappear altogether, for the consequences of failing to recognize their existence, and affirm their value, are simply too dire.

We would do well to remind ourselves that humanistic disciplines insist on this recognition, for the inherently critical, analytical, and self-reflective faculties they cultivate resist by their very nature the impulse to arrive at universalizing generalizations shared by both the social and natural sciences. If we can crudely characterize the latter as seeking to demonstrate the applicability of homologous laws of nature or sweeping theoretical abstractions (rational choice modeling, for example, or the delineation of patterns of modernization or democratization in what can at best be hoped for as a “context-sensitive” manner), then we can equally crudely recognize

in the humanities a predilection to follow the course of the particular. Before I arrived at UCLA, a faculty-staff workgroup had been charged with the task of suggesting how the impending budget cuts might be implemented at the administrative level. Various restructuring scenarios had been bruited about, most of which involved such drastic measures as actually merging departments, with especially intense scrutiny directed at the foreign language programs. The workgroup valiantly staked out a position against such consolidations, arguing that the distinctive business of the Division of Humanities—the study of literatures written in a bewildering multiplicity of languages—required an extensive apprenticeship in both the grammar of the language in question and its historical evolution within a specific cultural context, as well as a recognition of the concrete social, historical, and individual circumstances within which this apprenticeship was being conducted. Rather than pursuing universal and timeless laws that govern the production and features of literary texts, the workgroup’s report claimed, humanists “are concerned as scholars with the forms and the occurrences of the differences, the concrete peculiarities upon which meaning hinges. . . . Humanities celebrates the particular, the individual, the historical in opposition to the timeless and universal.” And the institutional consequence, according to this report? “Given this fundamental orientation, it is not surprising that humanistic study has produced a proliferation of small units, each concerned with some degree of peculiarity. Any other form of academic organization would betray the objects and aims of our inquiries.”<sup>6</sup>

Whatever its transparent self-interestedness, this argument harbors at least one noteworthy point. Just as the workgroup was struggling both against the local hegemony of the Department of English—that claimed half the majors and probably two-thirds of the student credit hours in the division—as well as against the rising tide of social science enrollments, so we will need to call on the critical and self-reflective skills of humanistic disciplines in general to ground the homogenization of theory and the mantras of globalization. If, as it appears, the university of the twenty-first century has declared itself an international institution, it ought to start by knowing something about the world. The forces driving this movement may not be the same as those that motivated the development of area studies in the fifties and sixties, whose accomplishments we’ve probably been too quick to discredit. But the seductions of universalism (more economic now, perhaps, than military and political) are no less powerful than they were decades ago.

There is no better time than now to cease bewailing the plight of the beleaguered and undervalued humanities and to recognize instead the essential role a humanist's insistence on local knowledge plays in expanding the vision of the monoptic globalizing lens. Let's insist that theory be open to being shaped by specific example, and that cultural studies recognize the distinctive features of cultures. As we move to internationalize our curricula (whether because of market forces or for a more lofty intellectual agenda), let us not forget to contextualize the questions we ask. Whose theory frames our analysis? In what ways does it risk eliding the nuances of the local? How do the questions we pose of other cultures tally with those they ask of themselves, and of us? To value the local and peculiar is not, I should stress, to become mired on the reefs of a cultural exceptionalism or essentialism that would deny all comparability whatsoever. As a comparatist who sought to bring theoretical issues to bear on the study of classical Chinese literature, I've enjoyed my share of vilification as a "metaphysician *manqu e*" for such intellectual impertinence. I'd prefer to think of comparative and theoretical inquiry as an example of "higher education as an open-ended conversation among those who have learned how to think differently about matters of general concern."<sup>7</sup>

Systematic, deep, contextual knowledge cannot but highlight those differences. And so, on a different level, must a recognition of the heterogeneity of the students we now teach, and especially (but not exclusively) on the west coast. I remember that when I began teaching Confucius in introductory courses on the Asian humanities twenty years ago in a large Midwestern university, I found it useful to focus students' attention initially on the ways in which a text like *The Analects* did or didn't pose questions like those that "we in the West" might have come to expect from reading the dialogues of Plato. However, when I walked into my first class in California in 1989 and looked at the students sitting there, I knew I'd have to change that line. And not just because they had never read Plato. (Let us hope, incidentally, that the diversity of the UC student body is something we manage to preserve.)

I think we all know well that the nineteenth-century methods of studying other parts of the world that shaped American institutions of higher education did not always aim to learn "how to think differently about matters of general concern" but more typically sought, through generalized paradigms, to think the same way about matters of great difference. What they also shared—and I am thinking here of a discipline like classics as much as I am of "oriental" studies—was a resolute, if fundamentally undisciplined, interdisciplinarity. The remarkable ease with which the

great sinologists could move from relic to painting to chronicle to text—and of any epoch whatsoever—was matched only by the alacrity with which they often disregarded the historical specificity of each of those documents. And they worked alone, confirming the stereotype of the humanist as solitary, independent scholar.

As two recent critiques of the contemporary university have argued, this too may change in the twenty-first century. In his recent book *We Scholars*, David Damrosch calls for an emergence from the individualist isolation of disciplinary enclaves that have become entrenched since the beginning of this century into a culture of cooperation, a community of small-scale research groups and team-taught courses to overcome the limits of specialization.<sup>8</sup> We can already see evidence of this movement on one campus after the other in the proliferation of centers for interdisciplinary collaboration in the humanities, as well as in the burgeoning of programs—both local and national—that support shifting interest clusters of faculty and graduate students. It is the appeal and vitality of such ventures that provide in my view the most salient counterargument to my divisional workgroup’s noble effort to defend the integrity of small departmental structures: shouldn’t they invest their identities in what they do (which at its best ignores the limits of boundaries) rather than in where they are—academic units whose nomenclature, structures, and categories often reflect the arbitrariness of historical accident or divisions of convenience?

Damrosch’s vision of a kind of communal therapy reflects a certain nostalgia for a time when a scholar—someone like Hegel is a good example—could have read everything, and a resigned acceptance of the impossibility of being a generalist in the modern age. In Bill Readings’ more acerbic version, articulated in his book, *The University in Ruins*, “the existing disciplinary model of the humanities is on the road to extinction,” stripped of its *raison d’être* as promoter and preserver of the national culture of the nation-state and now “cracking under the pressure of market imperatives”<sup>9</sup> that threaten to turn the university into a transnational corporation governed by the discourse of “excellence.” Like Damrosch, Readings proposes the adoption of “a certain rhythm of disciplinary attachment and detachment”: intentionally impermanent collaborations that resist institutional entrenchment and inertia. And rather than involving an exchange of “the rigid and outmoded disciplines for a simply amorphous disciplinary space,” this loosening of structures ought to provide an opportunity to foreground disciplinarity itself “as a *permanent question*. The short-term projects [he suggests] are designed to keep open the question of what it means to group knowledges in certain ways, and what it has meant that they have been so grouped in the past.”<sup>10</sup>

Readings provides us with yet another perspective on the transformations we are likely to see in the next decade and reminds us again of the crucial way in which humanistic inquiry can shape them. Without a profound understanding of the particulars of context and culture, we can hardly hope to produce a responsibly internationalized curriculum. Without a vigilantly self-reflective stance, we may not remember to revisit the notion of responsibility. Without a persistent willingness to rethink traditional categories, we may only delude ourselves about what it means to cross disciplines. And without a conviction to adjust modes of analysis to newly perceived realities, to question what seems obvious or without question, and to reaffirm what seems of enduring value, we risk forgetting wherein lies the essence of the humanities. We cannot afford to take the risk of losing the insights into ourselves, our pasts, and our futures that they teach us. And I don't think we will.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Readers will no doubt hear the faint echo, in my title, of Wallace Stevens' well-known poem, "The Course of a Particular."

<sup>2</sup> John Immerwhar, "Enduring Values, Changing Concerns: What Californians Expect from Their Higher Education System" (Public Agenda for The California Higher Education Policy Center, March 1997) 20.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Lease, "A 'Manifesto' for the Humanities" (University of California President's Advisory Committee on Research in the Humanities, September 1996).

<sup>4</sup> David Damrosch, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 109.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Chu, "Reports of the Bard's Demise Are Premature," *The Los Angeles Times* 25 March 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Report of the Workgroup on Administrative Restructuring (University of California, Los Angeles, December 1993) 3.

<sup>7</sup> James Miller, "The Academy Writes Back: Why We Can't Close the Book on Allan Bloom," *Linguaf Franca* March 1997: 62.

<sup>8</sup> Damrosch, *We Scholars*, esp. 187-214.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 176-177.

<sup>10</sup> Readings, 176-177.



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20. *The Humanities in the Schools*
21. *A Life of Learning* (1993 Charles Homer Haskins Lecture)  
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31. *Beyond the Academy: A Scholar's Obligations* by George R. Garrison et al.
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38. *Report of the President, 1986-1997* by Stanley N. Katz
39. *A Life of Learning* (1997 Charles Homer Haskins Lecture) by Natalie Zemon Davis
40. *The Transformation of Humanistic Studies in the Twenty-first Century: Opportunities and Perils* by Thomas Bender, Stanley Chodorow, and Pauline Yu