



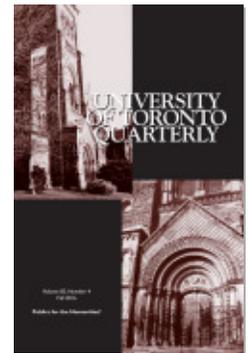
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Why the Humanities Must Be Public

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Why the Humanities Must Be Public

ABSTRACT

Many academics continue to assume or actively advocate for the idea of the university as radically autonomous from both state and civil society. This view was articulated by nineteenth-century German idealists, and has remained influential, but the university it imagines has never existed, even in Germany. My argument is that we need to reconceive the humanities' relation to the public. While we will want to continue to insist on a degree of autonomy greater than that enjoyed by most other American workers, we need to reconceive that autonomy as granted in the service of the public good, and we need to make the knowledge we produce available and accessible to those outside of academe.

KEYWORDS: humanities, public, genealogy, discipline, university

Stanley Fish, one of the most important literary scholars of the last fifty years, asserts, "The humanities are their own good. There is nothing more to say, and anything that is said . . . diminishes the object of its supposed praise" (Part One). Fish believes that literary criticism is a professional activity, and that its proper audience is other professionals and those training to be such at whatever level. In other words, Fish believes in academia as an ivory tower. He makes this point explicit when he says, "the value of the humanities cannot be validated by some measure external to the obsessions that lead some (like me) to devote their working lives to them – measures like increased economic productivity, or the fashioning of an informed citizenry, or the sharpening of moral perceptions, or the lessening of prejudice and discrimination" (Part Two).

In this paper, I will argue that Fish is both right and wrong here. Fish is wrong because society is under no obligation to support private obsessions, and the narcissism of the view that it is is one of reasons that the humanities have found themselves increasingly under attack. The university has an obligation to produce public knowledge, rather than knowledge just for corporations, the Defence Department, other specialists, or even for its own students. My assumption is that the knowledge produced by the university – and it matters not whether the particular institution is public or private – must be considered as a public good. This can be argued from the perspective of financial support in that the public

subsidizes all universities, whether directly or indirectly. In most of the world, the state is the primary supporter of universities. In the United States, while the state provides significant direct and indirect support, many universities (whether officially public or private), rely primarily on private donors and research contracts. But even considered as not-for-profit private entities, US universities are nevertheless subsidized, not only by indirect government appropriations such as Pell grants and student loan subsidies, but also by the tax codes that grant nonprofits and donations to them exemption from property and income taxes. On these grounds alone, it would seem clear that universities have a moral obligation to the public.

But what is the character of that public obligation and how, in the twenty-first century, are we supposed to conceive of the public? I acknowledge that the idea of a single “public” is a fiction, since humanities communication is not addressed to one unified population. Lauren Berlant has been exploring this problem in its manifold manifestations since her 1997 book, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, where she observes, “the notion of public life from the profession of politician to non-family-based forms of political activism, has been made to seem ridiculous and even dangerous to the nation” (5). But it is my argument that the fiction of a general public is indispensable in a democracy, and moreover, that the humanities can help rebuild belief in public life.¹ We humanists need to address the body politic, not corporate sponsors. We need to do this not only because our survival as academic humanists ultimately depends on the public, but also because the public desperately needs what the humanities provide.

Nevertheless, Fish is right to say that knowledge produced by the humanities cannot be validated by standards external to them. Thus, it is not my argument that the current disciplinary/professional organization of knowledge production should be scrapped. Disciplinary production of knowledge has been quite successful both in the quality of new ideas and in the quantity of new contributions. I agree with David Thunder’s call to “take seriously the purposes of humanities scholarship *as viewed by its own practitioners*” (47). We need to defend the value of disciplinary practices, in which the audience for scholarship is understood to be internal, because such practices are the seedbed of knowledge production. My argument, then, is that our obligation to the public requires not abandoning traditional modes of scholarly discourse, but adding new ones designed for a broader audience. Indeed, it is my argument that we need the public humanities in order to preserve the disciplinary humanities.

In order to make this case, I need first to offer a genealogy of the current university system, with a focus on its manifestation in the United

1 On the public as a fiction, see Warner *Publics and Counterpublics*.

States. The current system was shaped in part by the idea of the university propounded by German idealism, most influentially by Alexander von Humboldt. But that idea took shape within institutions influenced by many other forces, not only intellectual, but also political, economic, and organizational. The result was a partially autonomous university, devoted both to science (broadly conceived), and to its instrumental application. Because humanities research requires relatively little direct financial investment, the humanities have remained more autonomous than most other fields. But it is a fiction that any academic discipline exists in a vacuum, and it is a mistake to think that any should. The sciences have long recognized the need to communicate the results of scientific research to the public. While many humanists have sought to reach a wider audience, humanists in general have not been very effective in communicating the importance or interest of their work. But the humanities have the additional problem of not having “results” to communicate. Rather, humanists need to make the experience of the humanities available to those outside the ivory tower.

GENEALOGY

Few humanists would state the matter quite so absolutely, but the quotation from Fish captures the widely shared view that an academic’s obligations are solely to his or her peers and students. German idealism historically provided grounds for the notion that the university must be radically autonomous. The German idealist model, as Jürgen Habermas describes it, treats “the scientific process as a narcissistically self-enclosed circular process of research and teaching” (110). As Habermas explains, Humboldt and Friedrich Schleiermacher were “concerned with the problem of how modern science and scholarship, released from the tutelage of religion and the church, can be institutionalized without their autonomy being threatened from another quarter,” whether that be the state or bourgeois society (108). They also argue, according to Habermas, that “it is in the interest of the state itself to guarantee the university the external form of an internally unlimited freedom. A *Kulturstaat* of this kind is to be desired for the beneficial consequences that the unifying, totalizing power of science and scholarship institutionalized as research would necessarily have” (109).

Habermas argues that this “idea of the university” does help to explain some characteristics of the German university, but he also observes that this university never existed, even in Germany. The university has always been conceived as having a responsibility to something beyond its walls. Not only does he show that the German system was neither so purely devoted to research, nor so isolated from the state and bourgeois society, but he also asks “isn’t the very premise that a vast structure like

the modern university system should be permeated with and sustained by a way of thinking common to its members unrealistic?" (101).

The German model significantly influenced the higher education system in the United States, but Americans were more interested in the actual practice of German universities than they were in the theories behind them. Moreover, the German model was most influential on the research university, which was just one of several institutional forms that emerged in the United States beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, some of which were from the start understood to serve the needs of "bourgeois society." That is why we can't argue, as Bill Readings did in the *University in Ruins*, that the German idealist conception was the blueprint upon which the modern higher educational system was designed. As Lawrence Veysey's study shows, notions of social utility were at the root of the land-grant institutions that followed from the Morrill Act, while the idea of liberal culture, strongly influenced by Matthew Arnold, was at the root of the liberal arts college.

Moreover, the development of the professions, which occurs more or less simultaneously with the emergence of the research university, had a large impact on US higher education, and not only on professional schools such as medicine or law. As Andrew Abbott put it, professions are groups who compete for the control of work: "Control of knowledge and its application means dominating outsiders who attack that control. Control without competition is trivial" (2). Academic disciplines function as professions in this sense, creating and shoring up the boundaries of their piece of epistemic turf. The professional model helped both to secure and to limit academic autonomy. While the state typically ceded control of credentialing to professional schools, the fact that professions provided a public service meant that they also had to have a public face. Again, this extended to academic disciplines, which, to a greater or lesser extent, have defended themselves not only against other disciplines, but also against nonacademic interlopers. For example, as I showed in *Creating American Civilization*, early practitioners of the new discipline of American literature regularly reviewed books on the subject by non-academics, and, not surprisingly, found most of them wanting.

Despite these other influences, the idealist conception is at the root of the view that the university is best understood as an autonomous entity responsible only to Truth (See Thunder in this issue). In the United States, this conception lies behind some aspects of the university system that most faculty would want to preserve, especially academic freedom and faculty governance. Neither of these features was typical of American colleges before the advent of the research university in the 1870s. The older colleges were dominated by autocratic presidents who could hire and fire at will. The influence of the German model helped to establish

new traditions of faculty governance and, eventually, academic freedom protected by the tenure system.

But the actual autonomy of the American university, even of the leading research universities, was always limited. As Christopher Newfield shows in *Ivy and Industry*, the American university as a whole was always dependent on business, and this dependence grew significantly over the course of the twentieth century (19–21). Moreover, he shows how business management was imported into the university as “university management.” This entailed a system of “divided governance” in which “(f)aculty had real control over their individual work and local supervisory authority. But this did not allow faculty *as a group* to wield decision-making power” (Newfield 80, emphasis in original). This individual autonomy came with a price: “public areas of personal action and sovereignty were often abandoned” (Newfield 87). In practice then, bourgeois society has allowed individual and disciplinary autonomy in the US research university as the price for scientific progress.

Notice, however, the keywords “Truth” and “science.” As the research university emerged, the tripartite division of the disciplines we have come to take for granted was itself only just emerging. As in the German *Wissenschaft*, all knowledge was conceived to be the product of science, and all knowledge produced by such means was regarded as having value. While the humanities were distinguishable by their objects of study, they were not yet regarded as defined by methodological differences. Some of this involves the slow emergence of science itself as the dominant model of knowledge. The older model, in which knowledge was understood to be contained in literature – meaning not aesthetically valuable works, but writing in general – continued to be influential, accounting in part for the prestige of the humanities, which dealt with literature.

When philology and literary history gave way to the New Criticism in US literary studies, it marked a then-unrecognized shift from positivism to hermeneutics. By the late 1950s, when Harry Levin could already remark, “the investigation of *Moby-Dick* might almost be said to have taken the place of whaling among the industries of New England,” the value of such investigations had already become suspect in and outside of the discipline (vi). While there had always been critique of New Critical theory, that critique had little impact in the profession as a whole until the 1960s, when dissatisfaction with New Critical practice grew. On the one hand, this dissatisfaction stemmed from the need either to govern the proliferation of interpretations or to find ways to convincingly add new ones. On the other, it grew out of a sense that literary study, by focusing exclusively on the text, was ignoring the socially meaningful connections literature had with larger human experience, a point that was reinforced by the campus upheavals of the decade. It was in this

context that French theory made its appearance. At first, in its structuralist manifestation, it seemed to provide governance, a way to make interpretation more determinate, but the new theory quickly became a source for new readings, and, ultimately, a justification for the inability of the discipline to decide among them.

Historically, academic autonomy isolated researchers not only from political interference, but also from political involvement. In the humanities in particular, researchers have tended to work in isolation, communicating their “results” mainly with students and other specialists. The social upheavals of the 1960s, and especially the new politicized campus environment they produced in the United States, resulted in a new sense that the humanities needed to engage with contemporary social issues. Knowledge itself came to be politicized, and the idea of disinterested knowledge was widely questioned. Branches of knowledge such as Black Studies and Women’s Studies grew out of political movements. Thus, not only did humanistic knowledge seem increasingly undecidable, but it also seemed threatening to in-place social hierarchies.

The relative autonomy of the university allowed all of this to happen, though it is unclear whether the humanities to any significant extent suffered because of their newly politicized character. If they did not, it may be because very little of what they produced ever made it to an audience beyond the ivory tower. The isolation of the university allowed for teaching and research to continue largely without interference, though there were attempts by the Right to rein in the academic Left. The newly political humanities continued to function on the German idealist model, though they did encourage some academics to aspire to become public intellectuals, a project in which few have been successful.

THE NEED FOR PUBLIC HUMANITIES

One does not hear many people in the United States these days arguing as explicitly as Fish for the absolute autonomy of the university, since the rhetoric of recent debates has been mainly couched in the discourse of service and utility. Yet, my sense is that though they may know better than to articulate this view this bluntly, most academic humanists in research universities share Fish’s view that the value of the humanities is *sui generis*, dependent upon no use value for those outside the ivory tower. Indeed, the humanities centre movement, which emerged out the idea of the “institute for advanced study,” was an expression of this view of research, here, however, moving away from the essential connection to teaching of German idealism. Moreover, one could argue that the vast explosion of humanities research that accompanied the expansion of the American university beginning after World War II and continuing through at least the first decade of this century would seem to confirm

the idea that this research has autonomous value. With teaching loads of tenured faculty shrinking and ever more institutions making tenure dependent on scholarly publication, it appeared that someone believed this research had value even if it – with rare exceptions – had little impact beyond a small circle of specialists.

The question that Fish's statement makes us ask is why society would continue to pay for him to pursue his obsessions if they did not have a value external to the obsessed. My own sense is that this very question is now being asked by politicians and boards of trustees, who are at least beginning to doubt that research is inherently valuable. And when we consider that some of this research claims to be radical, that is, opposing the social order as currently constituted, we can imagine why it might be actively opposed. On the whole, attacks on the university have seldom focused on political differences with professors, but rather have been couched in utilitarian and economic terms. Budgets are cut because it's bad to raise taxes and because the university is not producing students who get jobs. The latter is especially important, because the association of the university with improved employment potential went hand in hand with its expansion after World War II. While it should be simple arithmetic that more people with degrees will make those degrees less valuable, this consideration has almost never been taken into account.

My argument is that we need to reconceive the humanities' relationship to the public. While we will want to continue to insist on a degree of autonomy greater than that enjoyed by most other American workers, we need to reconceive that autonomy as granted in the service of the public good, rather than the good of the state, as in the German model, or the good of the corporations, as in current US practice. In this conception, the knowledge the university produces must be available to the public, and, by "available," I don't just mean published, but intellectually accessible. It is not enough that our research is already in theory available, because its purpose and interest is not understood. Much of the public seems only to be able to comprehend knowledge as something that is either true or false. While humanities research does entail some amount of objective content, it is not mainly designed to produce it. The humanities research that tends to command the most media attention, however, involves the discovery of some lost work – in other words, an object has been found and "proved" to be something important. It is far less frequent that an interpretation of a work or a judgment of its value makes news.

Making the humanities available to the public means making the epistemic world of the humanities available, a world where what matters is that interpretations differ. It is because this epistemic world has largely been hidden away that the value of the humanities has been misunderstood. Our task as humanities scholars is to figure out how to make

what we do available, while at the same time continuing to do it. This means internal structures of validation must remain preeminent in disciplines of liberal arts and sciences. The productivity of the disciplinary organization of knowledge is allowed by its relative autonomy, a fact that is explained by Paul Feyerabend's observation that there are no reliable means to know in advance when a strategy of inquiry will work (23–28). The work of the non-applied academic disciplines is structured around disciplinary problems – or puzzles, as Thomas Kuhn called them – not matters directly related to ordinary problems. The freedom to work on matters not dictated by immediate social, economic, or political needs enables creativity by making it safer to try new directions and to risk failure. Of course, the disciplines themselves also typically restrict inquiry in various ways, but the disciplinary organization of inquiry allows far more freedom than inquiry directed from the outside. The public in general seems to have trouble understanding that human knowledge develops largely by indirection. We solve real-world problems not by devoting all of our energy directly to them, but by working on other questions whose importance or value are internal to the inquiry itself. Thus, a certain degree of autonomy is required for the academy to provide the public with the knowledge it needs.

Yet, as I have said, this autonomy has increasingly been questioned, especially as applied to the humanities and social sciences. The natural sciences are often given a pass for their autonomy because historically discoveries made through pure research have had a demonstrable impact on ordinary life, and because the sciences claim to be able to produce truths upon which there is widespread agreement rather than a myriad of differing and competing points of view. Neither of these qualifications apply to the humanities, which are not seen as leading to practical applications and which are seen as yielding only disparate opinions. Of course, even the sciences have recently come under political pressure, but there remains considerable public support for science.

The value of the humanities to the public should not be presented primarily in terms of the uses they serve, the sort of things that Fish lists such as “increased economic productivity, or the fashioning of an informed citizenry” (Part Two). This is not because humanities don't in fact contribute beneficially to these practical problems, but because they must do so indirectly. For example, when it is observed that one benefit of studying the humanities is better communications skills, the response has been not to encourage the study of the humanities, but to teach “communications skills” as an end in themselves. The problem with this approach is that communication is an enormously complex intellectual task that requires not only understanding the use of language, but also background knowledge so that the writer has something intelligent to communicate. Similarly, the humanities do indeed help provide an informed and a civil

citizenry, but the humanities are not best understood as training for such purposes because these benefits accrue precisely because the attention of the humanities is focused primarily elsewhere.²

The humanities must be public so that the public can come to understand them and thus be willing to lend them their support. Public support for the sciences has long been promoted by public relations efforts designed to translate scientific research into discourse suitable for the lay audience. This includes not only efforts tied directly to research budgets of scientists themselves, but also of dedicated media outlets such as *Scientific American* and the *New York Times* science reporters. It is instructive to compare the way science figures in the news media with the way the humanities do. While science reporters typically write about the knowledge academic scientists have produced, very little is ever reported about the knowledge academic humanists produce. Instead, the news media, in effect, compete with the academic humanities, offering their own interpreters and analysts who almost never deign to mention the academic research on which their work often depends.

The goal of the public humanities is to bring the humanities to the public. This is not to say that most people are completely lacking in experiences like those provided by the humanities. As Simon Frith has observed, "Part of the pleasure of popular culture is talking about it; part of its meaning is this talk, talk which is run through with value judgments. To be engaged with popular culture is to be discriminating" (4). Indeed, one of the reasons why the humanities are sometimes dismissed is that it seems that anyone can do what they do. If everyone is a critic, why do we need professionals? When we bring the humanities to the public, we answer this question by showing how the expertise of humanists can enrich cultural experiences. The public value of the arts is now widely (if not universally) accepted in the United States, and many localities regard support for the arts as an economic investment. Yet, few realize that the humanities are essential to the arts. Museums need curators, symphonies musicologists, and theatre companies dramaturges. As these examples show, art appreciation must be cultivated; education of the audience is an essential activity of arts institutions. Making the humanities public can both enlarge the audience for the arts and increase its commitment.

Making the humanities public does not mean enslaving them to practical needs. Rather, it means making the experience of non-instrumental reason available to non-academics. Again, the claim is not that ordinary people have no experience of such reason; indeed, they practise it routinely, but they may not recognize that they are doing so. For example,

² I am happy to agree with the arguments of Martha Nussbaum and Doris Sommer, but I don't think that these are in the end likely to succeed in getting the public to support the humanities, and I worry that they may have the unintended effect of restricting the humanities to work that is directed toward the goals they discuss.

talk about popular culture may seem instrumental because its end is perceived as deciding what music to buy or movie to see. But even if such decisions are related to such talk, both the quality and quantity of such talk would suggest that it is not in fact primarily practised to achieve this goal. Rather, the activity itself is enjoyable, and it makes the experience of music or movies more enjoyable. What making the humanities public can do is broaden the experience of non-instrumental reason, providing occasions for discussion not only of the arts, but also of topics in all of areas of human life. Such discussion is distinguished by its open-ended character; while real-world problems may often be on the table, the purpose of the discussion is not to bring about a solution, but to imagine different solutions.

Non-instrumental reason's value, however, goes beyond its contribution to an ultimate instrumentality and the pleasure derived from its own practice. To illustrate this, consider a column the *New York Times* recently ran in its science pages entitled, "The Real World is Not an Exam" (Zuger). It began this way:

My young friend had just finished the last months of his medical training. He had faced down many multiple-choice tests and triumphed over them all.

Starting with the S.A.T.s and ending with a series of medical licensing exams, including all the prep courses and practice exams, he probably had tens of thousands of single best answers under his belt. Now they were all burbling up to the surface.

The essay goes on to explain that the young doctor never learned to live with uncertainty:

Like all victims of the single best answer syndrome, he ordered tests in wild profusion because, in his experience, every question had an answer and a test that would get you there.

Doctors have long insisted that medicine is an art rather than a science, much less a technology, and this column helps to explain the difference. The column shows why future physicians would do well to study the humanities. All doctors know that in treating patients over a lifetime, they will eventually encounter a problem for which no solution exists. It is no coincidence that death is one of the great subjects of art and literature. Not just doctors, but all people must come to terms with their own mortality, so learning to think non-instrumentally can be beneficial for everyone. The humanities deal with problems that cannot be solved in the way that multiple choice questions or equations can. The humanities address experiential problems such as death, the best form of government, or the reality of differing cultural or individual perspectives.

What it means to make the humanities available requires that we create appropriate discourses and appropriate venues. Academics are taught to write for each other, and the tenure process doubtless has the effect of limiting the amount of non-academic writing young humanists produce. While it would be salutary for tenure guidelines to recognize the value of writing for the public, I'm not arguing that such writing should entirely replace disciplinary discourse as a tenure requirement. Rather, it should be encouraged as a skill for younger faculty to develop, but for the purpose of enabling more public writing later in the individual's career. While the common perception that academic prose is impenetrable to most readers is inaccurate, it is true that the interests of specialists and non-specialists differ. Learning to write for the public is less about avoiding jargon than it is about presenting one's material engagingly. As TED talks illustrate, it is possible to present esoteric research in a way that makes it seem relevant to broad audiences. Humanities practitioners need to become adept at this kind of communication.

I recognize that the ambition to become a "public intellectual" has already become widespread among humanities faculty, and that the realities of journalism in contemporary America often thwart this ambition. Being a public intellectual might be one way to make the humanities public, but it is not what I am calling for here. The idea of the intellectual, as it arises with Émile Zola and his defence of Alfred Dreyfus, entails the role of the lonely outsider attacking the status quo. Not only is the public unlikely to support very many intellectuals of this sort, but also the role does not require the special knowledge or expertise that distinguish the humanities. These conditions in part account for the fact that few academic humanists have successfully become public intellectuals, but there are obstacles that are instructive for the larger project of the public humanities. Not only is there a historical prejudice within journalism against the academy – part of a larger anti-intellectualism – but there is also the decline of print media in the wake of the Internet. The latter has meant not only that competition to write for newspapers and magazines has become much more heated, but also that once one is published, one reaches a smaller audience. Still, the Internet has begun to create new venues for the public humanities such as the *L.A. Review of Books*. Such venues should be something that academic humanists actively seek to create and build.

Still, it is clear that writing for non-academic audiences has its limits. Making the humanities public will require new forms of contact, especially ones where humanists and the public can meet face to face. Humanities festivals, adult education classes, and book discussion groups are some examples of current activities that make the humanities more available, but we need more of them, and other options. We need more direct contribution to such activities from universities. In the United States,

the public humanities have often been the focus of state humanities councils, which are NGOs that receive support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. But with some notable exceptions, the state humanities councils have failed to reach beyond fairly narrow constituencies. Moreover, in many cases they seem themselves at odds with the academy, resulting in a failure to promote the value of the humanities where they in the main reside. While the councils are potential partners for public humanities projects, universities cannot rely on these or any other entities to make the humanities public. This is an essential project of the universities themselves.

Recent political currents in Europe and the United States make the need for the public humanities all the greater now. The attack on “experts” that accompanied the recent Brexit vote in the UK is evidence of the widening gap between the academic and certain publics. The rise of Donald Trump in the United States has been seen as rooted in a similar suspicion of specialized knowledge. Both phenomena have been seen as examples of the rise of narrow and exclusionary nationalisms, spelling perhaps the likelihood of more attacks on the humanities, which have been increasingly devoted to the study and promotion of cultural diversity. While the humanities are, to some extent, a potential counterforce to these proto-fascist developments, I am not arguing that the humanities can by themselves defeat them. Rather, I am arguing that under these circumstances, which add to the pressures on the humanities from neo-liberal ideology and practice already discussed, the humanities need to reach out to diverse publics, so that through experience with the humanities they will become invested in the future of them.

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“Countercultures,” *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature* (Ed. Brian McHale, 2016)

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