

Adam POTKAY

THE HUMANITIES IN THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY A BELLE ÉPOQUE?

I am tempted to call the present moment in the humanities a belle époque in allusion to the period of high-bourgeois civility and calm before the Great War, and I do so because our own period is probably another such period of calm before the storm. It's a beautiful period and it seems destined to succumb to the political and economic instability that underwrites it.

I thank the editors of *Ethos* for inviting me to share my reflections on the conditions and prospects for the humanities here in the United States. Because the topic is a large and challenging one, I've limited it in several ways. First, I discuss the state of the humanities in the US university system (rather than in the culture at large). And, because our public universities are funded and regulated by individual states, rather than by the federal government, I pay particular attention to the university I know best: The College of William and Mary in Virginia, where I have been teaching British and comparative literature since 1990.

There's a long tradition of speaking with alarm about the state of the humanities in the American university, and it has been revived lately by dropping enrollments in some top US universities: thus, to quote the title of a recent *New York Times* article, "As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry."¹ And worry they well may, because the long-term prospects for the humanities, as I detail below, are doubtful. But let me begin with what I take to be a little-admitted perception among professors at elite American universities: if one is lucky enough to have a full-time position as a tenured or tenure-eligible professor in any high- or mid-ranked US university, there has never been a better time than right now to teach and conduct scholarly research in the humanities. And for our students, both undergraduate and post-graduate, who have the wherewithal to "seize the day, little trusting in the future," there's arguably never been a better time to study the humanities.² Why is it, however precariously, the best of times? In part it's because, for economic reasons, undergraduate interest in the humanities is subsiding and, for graduate students, the job prospects for

¹ Tamar Lewin, "As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry," *The New York Times*, 4 November, 2013, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/education/as-interest-fades-in-the-humanities-colleges-worry.html>.

² I allude here to Horace's Odes 1.11: "*carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.*"

new professors are limited. The former phenomenon makes for fewer students in undergraduate courses, the latter for fewer graduate students being admitted into PhD programs, even while—and this is crucial—the number of instructional faculty has not yet substantially decreased, and, given the relative security of tenured job lines, will decrease only gradually. In short, at a wide variety of US colleges and universities, the ratio between students and faculty has grown smaller, resulting—at least ideally, or in many cases—in smaller classes, more attention to individual students, and more manageable conditions for faculty.

At the same time, at many or most US universities—certainly in the top tier of institutions—faculty “course loads,” or the number of courses taught each semester or term, has shrunk over the past 30 or 40 years from 3 or 4 courses per term to 2 or 3 courses per term, with additional course-release for administrative duties. Thus, as Chairman or Head of my English department—admittedly a sometimes onerous job—I teach only one course a semester. Moreover, we have limited enrollment in our writing-intensive courses to 27 students, and fewer than half our courses completely fill. During my first semester at William & Mary, in 1990, I taught 3 courses with a total of about 110 students; this past semester, teaching half-time, I had one course and 21 students. This decrease in the teaching load of professors in the humanities has been due in large part to the decreasing teaching loads—and increased research expectations—of professors in the sciences; university administrators have maintained a parity of teaching loads and (in a general way) research or scholarly expectations between colleagues in the sciences and the humanities. The sciences have been the leaders in this process of elevating research in relation to teaching duties, and at the moment professors in the humanities have benefited from this latest development in the career of the modern research university.

Fewer courses and fewer students: these conditions have allowed me to spend more time on individual students, and this has proved important at a time when many of them need more attention than did students of 10 or 20 years ago because they are no longer consistently instructed at the secondary school level in the basics of grammar, composition, and critical argumentation, let alone literary analysis. (Indeed, the condition of the humanities at the secondary school level is more dismaying than their status at the university level—but that’s a problem beyond the scope of this essay.)

Fewer courses and fewer students have also allowed me to maintain a very active scholarly life, writing books and articles, directing and attending professional seminars and conferences, serving on editorial boards for academic journals, and vetting manuscripts for university presses. It has, I think, been a very good time in our profession to do these things, for a variety of reasons. First, I remain in awe of the changes for the better wrought by technology over the past twenty-five or thirty years. In 1987, while writing my PhD dissertation,

I purchased my first word processor, promptly jettisoning my old type-writer: never again would “cutting and pasting” be the same. In the mid-90s, e-mail enabled rapid correspondence and document transmission, transforming my duties as an academic journal editor, especially in my dealings with international authors and reviewers. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, my scholarly life was enhanced by a variety of online searchable databases, to which my university library promptly subscribed, including JSTOR, Project Muse, and ECCO (Eighteenth-Century Collections Online). All these innovations strike me as almost unmitigated goods for the humanities: I say “almost” only because I have some trepidation that new PhDs trained to examine “big data” and other potentialities of the digital humanities have lost the ability to do, or perhaps the interest in doing, slow close reading of poetry and artful prose. Also, a world with “google translate” hasn’t helped to encourage language proficiencies (ancient or modern) in English-speaking scholars who as a group are already given to monolingual complacency.

While technology has provided the tools for enhanced scholarly activity—including international communication and collaboration—our present moment in the humanities is also characterized by a lack of the political divisions, the ideological and critical-methodological conflicts, that defined so much of 20th-century intellectual life. Here in the US, the earlier twentieth century saw conflict first between old-style philologists and formalist “New Critics,” and the last three decades saw still more rancorous debates between formalism, historical criticism, and Continental theory. Though to a lesser degree than in Europe, the humanities in the US were also highly politicized in the later twentieth century, when the last fervors of Marxist criticism merged into the liberationist energies of feminist and queer theory. The vehemence of these debates, and in particular the excesses of theoretically-driven models of interpretation, are largely exhausted. Our current moment is largely characterized by calmness and decorum, civility and sense—some may think of this as the effect of intellectual exhaustion, but I’d rather look on the bright side. The newer PhDs I’ve worked with tend to write clearly and humanely: they write, to paraphrase a past president of the MLA (Modern Language Association of America), prose that someone might pay to read, rather than prose that someone (that is, a professor) has to be paid to read.³ We have begun to think once again about meaning and value, form and beauty; about the enduring metaphysical and ethical and religious questions that should always be central to the humanities. In the 1970s-1990s, politically-minded critics harped upon the need to “interrogate” literary texts, as though they were all suspected of

³ Elaine Showalter, “Nice Work if You Can Get It,” *MLA (Modern Languages Association) Newsletter* 30, no. 4 (1998): 3–4.

crimes against humanity. Now I look on my shelf and see among my favorite books of recent years the titles *Gratitude: An Intellectual History*; *Security: Politics, Humanity, and the Philology of Care*; *Surprise: The Poetics of the Unexpected from Milton to Austen*; and a manuscript I recently vetted for Harvard University Press, *Self and Soul: In Defense of Ideals*. These books are characteristic of a broader tendency in US literary studies to turn inward, reflecting on the human condition in broad, trans-historical ways. I am tempted to call the present moment in the humanities a *belle époque* in allusion to the period of high-bourgeois civility and calm before the Great War, and I do so because our own period is probably another such period of calm before the storm. It's a beautiful period and it seems destined to succumb to the political and economic instability that underwrites it.

Or perhaps something that might more properly be called a *belle époque*, on the late nineteenth-century model, is yet to come, as US society veers towards a degree of class stratification unseen since the days of Proust and Henry James—another “Gilded Age,” to use a term from US history. My suspicion is that, in the near future, the humanities will become the province of a much smaller, more elite body of students—as will the US university system as a whole. This shrinkage won't be an entirely bad thing. As it stands, our university system has been bloated by an influx of students,⁴ enticed by readily available federal loans, that is much larger than the job market for professionals can support. The result, as economists acknowledge, is that many college graduates, burdened with large debts (collectively, one trillion dollars), take jobs for which they're over-qualified, while workers without college degrees are forced into ever more menial jobs.⁵

The availability of student loans has coincided with states withdrawing funding from public or state universities, causing a spiral of increasing university costs and student debt. About 80% of US university students attend public, state-supported universities.⁶ These universities, particularly the best of them (including my own), have grown much more expensive in the past twenty-five years. States used to subsidize generously the education of in-state students, but this is no longer the case. I'd like to use my own university as an example, but first I need to explain a bit of its history, and how it became a public

⁴ Enrollment in degree-granting institutions increased by 11 percent between 1991 and 2001; between 2001 and 2011, it increased 32 percent, from 15.9 million to 21 million. (US National Center for Education Statistics, website, nces.ed.gov).

⁵ Robert Reich, “Why College is Necessary but Gets you Nowhere,” robertreich.org/post, 24 November 2014. Robert Reich, former US Secretary of Labor in the Bill Clinton administration, is Professor of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley.

⁶ Public Higher Education in America. <http://www.cuny.edu/site/cc/higher-education/gi-bill.html>.

university. The College of William & Mary has been owned by the state (or “Commonwealth,” as it is here known) of Virginia since 1906, although its history is much older than that. It is the second-oldest college in America, after Harvard (1636); on February 8, 1693, King William III and Queen Mary II of England signed the charter for a “perpetual College of Divinity, Philosophy, Languages, and other good Arts and Sciences” to be founded in the Virginia Colony. Thomas Jefferson received his undergraduate education here, as did presidents James Monroe and John Tyler. The winds of war, however, were not favorable to the College: William & Mary is the only US college to be occupied twice by enemy forces, first by the invading British army in 1781-82 (the War of Independence) and later by federal troops in 1862-65 (the Civil War). Bankrupt, the College was purchased by the Commonwealth of Virginia and restarted as a public university in 1906. Today, it retains charter-name of “College,” but it’s really a mid-size university that offers 40 postgraduate and professional programs, with 6,299 undergraduates and 2,138 graduate students, and at the moment 609 full-time faculty members, with almost a third of us in the Humanities, largely focused on undergraduate teaching.⁷

Our tuition has risen steeply in recent years, in response to declining subsidies by the Commonwealth of Virginia. The state requires that William & Mary—and also The University of Virginia, founded by Thomas Jefferson in 1819 as a publically-supported school—take at least 65% of our students from in-state, allowing us to enroll 35% from out of state. The in-state tuition was exceptionally low when I arrived in 1990—\$1,900—and out-of-state tuition, \$7,800, much less than universities of comparable quality. Tuition then played a much smaller part of university’s overall budget: in 1990 the Commonwealth of Virginia provided 33% of the university’s base operating budget. Now state funding is down to about 12% of our operating budget (8% at the University of Virginia). In response, tuition has gone up substantially: our cost for in-state students is now \$12,500 (more than 6 times the cost of 1990), and for out-of-state and international students, \$28,000 (almost 4 times the cost of 1990). Students must also pay for living expenses and books—roughly another \$16,000. Thus, for out-of-state students, tuition plus living expenses total \$44,000—which is nearly the US Median Household income for 2013, \$52,000. We are able to offer some, but not a lot, of need-based financial aid. Harvard, a private university, has a total cost of \$62,000 a year, with living

⁷ Our faculty includes 50 full-time professors in Modern Languages, 42 in English/Linguistics, 37 in History, 14 in Philosophy, 13 in Music, 13 in Art and Art History, 9 in Classics (Greek, Latin, Hebrew), 8 in Religious Studies. Our 12-1 student/faculty ratios is the lowest among top public universities.

expenses, but its massive private endowment allows it to offer generous financial aid for those who need it.

The rising cost of university education has encouraged students to pursue majors that they or their parents believe will result in lucrative careers. At Harvard, the most popular majors are Government and Economics; as a recent *New York Times* article reports, Harvard has had a 20 percent decline in humanities majors in the past decade. The same article focuses on the still more dramatic decline of the humanities at Stanford University in California, where Computer Science is now the university's most popular major. Although 45% of Stanford's undergraduate faculty is in the humanities, only 15% of its undergraduate students are.⁸ At William & Mary, the decline of the humanities is not (yet) nearly so dramatic. English language and literature was, during the 1990s, one of the top three majors; it was, as of the latest study (2012), the fourth most popular major, behind government, psychology, and biology, and just ahead of finance (a major offered through our School of Business). I suspect Finance will rise above English soon, if it hasn't already.

It's important to note, however, that in the US university system, unlike many European systems, the number of majors in the humanities is not the same as the number of students in humanities courses. At William & Mary, as at most top-tier US universities, even Finance majors have to take a few courses in the humanities: our general education requirements ensure that all our undergraduates have some exposure to our disciplines. Indeed, a student's major or field of concentration typically occupies only 30-40% of the total number of courses he or she will take during four years. Moreover, some post-graduate fields of study outside the humanities have a healthy respect for the humanities: so, for example, US Medical Schools require that candidates take several courses in literature, in the hope that that they'll learn to communicate and to listen, and to participate imaginatively and compassionately in the lives of others.

What about post-graduate study in the humanities? With the job market as bad as it is for recent graduates, PhD study would seem to be an attractive option for our best humanities students, and in some ways it is: an entering student in a US PhD program can expect to receive full tuition plus a \$20,000-\$25,000 annual stipend for up to 5 or 6 years. As I tell my most motivated students, it's a wonderful way to spend one's 20s, immersed in the great art and thinkers of the past, and if they are unable in the end to find a teaching post in a university, there are other possibilities in secondary education, publishing, library science, government, and non-profit organizations involved in arts and culture, political advocacy, and so forth. However, admissions to

⁸ Lewin, "As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry."

PhD programs have become increasingly selective, and full-time tenure-track positions for PhDs increasingly scarce. PhD programs in the humanities have shrunk dramatically in the past twenty-five years. In English, a large program such as the University of Virginia's used to enroll 75 students a year through the 1980s; it now admits just 12 students a year. For a variety of reasons, there are few jobs for newly minted PhDs in the university system: first, because universities (especially large state universities) are cutting operating costs by hiring part-time adjunct faculty, most of them MAs rather than PhDs, rather than tenure-eligible, full-time faculty.⁹ A second factor is the trend among tenured faculty, who have no mandatory retirement age in the US, to work into their 70s or even 80s. I would state that this trend is unadvisable as public policy and perhaps even immoral (although it is illegal at a US public university to suggest that faculty ought to retire, or in any way to discriminate on the basis of age). Yet I am given pause, within the context of my own department, by the probability that when my senior colleagues retire, their positions will not be replaced. Retirements will in all likelihood become the means by which administrators shrink humanities faculties. And thus the enviable student/faculty ratios we now enjoy in the humanities will become a thing of the past.

Whatever else it might be, the future for the humanities would hardly seem to be expansive. Given the rising cost of a university education, and the anxieties produced by a highly-competitive, world-encompassing job market, students, and especially our male students, are gravitating towards areas of study that would seem to lead to immediate financial success (such as business) or immediate financial security (engineering, computer science). (It should be noted that an increasing percentage of our humanities majors are women.)

The problem with aiming at lucrative careers, however, is that it's often difficult to predict future market needs. Engineers and computer scientists are now in high demand, but this may not last—indeed, it's unlikely to last if many more university students commit to these fields. University education, in most sciences and social sciences, as well as in the humanities, is not now the more or less guaranteed bridge to a better economic condition that it was from the initial expansion of the US university system after World War II, until the recent hyper-expansion of the past twenty years.

If education today cannot guarantee a better economic future, it seems to me a very good time to revive an earlier notion of what an education should do—that is, to turn young people into better persons. I encourage my students, in whatever they do, to continue to enjoy the life of reading, and to read great books. This enjoyment will, to some degree, be a selfish one, but it has the

⁹ Michael B é r u b é , "Abandon All Hope," *Pedagogy* 15, no.1 (2014):3–12; the relevant statistics appear on p. 9.

advantage of making one relatively independent of external circumstances, including the wheel of fortune that is our global economy. If you've majored in Finance and your only purpose in going to College is financial gain, you'll be absolutely disappointed in a low-paying job for which you're over-qualified. But if you've become acquainted with Aristotle and Aquinas, Tocqueville and Tolstoy, the same job should prove only relatively disappointing. Moreover, the life of reading, of ideas and values, has its public dimension as well: it is still requisite to responsible and empathetic citizenship in a free and open republic. So I close with an excerpt from Thomas Jefferson's still vital vision of what a public university should aim to do: "To develop the reasoning faculties of our youth, enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals, and instill into them the precepts of virtue and order ... And generally, to form them to habits of reflection, and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves."¹⁰

¹⁰ "Report to the Commissioners of the University of Virginia" [The Rockfish Gap Report], 1818, quoted from http://www.founding.com/founders_library/pageID.2361/default.asp.