

Article

“Imagining What We Know”: The Humanities in a Utilitarian Age

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Abstract: This paper explores the ways that critics writing in the early nineteenth century developed arguments in favor of what we think of today as the humanities in the face of utilitarian pressures that dismissed the arts as self-indulgent pursuits incapable of addressing real-world problems. Its focus reflects the extent to which the financial crisis in our own day has manifested itself in a jarring shift in research priorities towards applied knowledge: a retrenchment which has foregrounded all over again the question of how to make the case for the value of the humanities. These problems, however, also constitute an important opportunity: a chance to re-imagine our answers to questions about the nature and role of the humanities, their potential benefits to contemporary life, and how we might channel these benefits back into the larger society. The good news is that in many ways, this self-reflexive challenge is precisely what the humanities have always done best: highlight the nature and the force of the narratives that have helped to define how we understand our society—its various pasts and its possible futures—and to suggest the larger contexts within which these issues must ultimately be situated. History repeats itself, but never in quite the same way: knowing more about past debates will provide a crucial basis for moving forward as we position ourselves to respond to new social, economic, technological, and cultural challenges during an age of radical change.

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1. The Present Crisis

For those of us working in the humanities it is, as Charles Dickens famously said, the best of times and the worst of times. The digital revolution has manifested itself in a range of cultural changes that are in many ways far more radical than the ones unleashed by the invention of the printing press over five hundred years ago, and they have made their presence felt far more swiftly. Where those earlier changes took centuries before their impact was fully realized, the digital revolution has redefined our communicative world in decades. And whereas the invention of moveable type preserved the basic form of the codex, the digital revolution has altered the most fundamental ways that it is possible to think about the materiality of writing, and about the relation between books and texts. Its interactive possibilities have also forced us to reimagine our ideas about the relationship between authors and readers, and between the individual reader and the reading public (or publics) to which he or she may feel they belong. Never before has a generation lived through such extraordinary technological and cultural changes.

Nor are these changes limited to those emerging creative and critical forms that have become known as digital humanities. The advent of new technologies and the new forms of textual community they enable have cast those earlier technologies of writing associated with manuscript and print culture in an exciting new light by helping to expose many of the assumptions that had, until the last couple of decades, been so thoroughly naturalized that they resisted critical analysis. As critics such as Adrien Johns and Andrew Piper have argued, becoming more attuned to the historical arbitrariness of these technological achievements (the fact that their history did not unfold in any preordained way) has made us newly aware of the kinds of ideological work that were required in order *not* to think about the many forms of mediation (cultural, political, technological, educational, economic) that had naturalized these earlier forms of textual production [1,2]. As a result of these changes in our own day, we have very rapidly grown used to thinking in far broader terms about the kinds of infrastructure that lurk just beneath the surface of the production, circulation, and reception of the books whose material reality earlier critics tended to dismiss in order to concentrate on the literary richness of the ideas they contained. Predictions of “the death of the book” (a media favorite for the past several years, though it seems to have diminished recently) may have been premature, but we can never take the idea of “the book” for granted again.

That is the upside. But if the extraordinarily rapid and wide-ranging changes unleashed by the digital revolution have shaken up our most entrenched assumptions about important forms of cultural production and reception in critically exciting ways, it is equally true that it is hard to think of a time when the humanities were so badly besieged on any number of levels, the most serious of which has been a jarring shift in research priorities towards market-driven applied knowledge: a retrenchment that has foregrounded all over again the question of how to make the case for the value of the humanities. As Martha Nussbaum has recently argued, “we are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance”: not “the global economic crisis that began in 2008” (though that context is definitely part of the issue), but the widespread erosion of support for the humanities in terms of both pedagogical and research priorities within universities ([3], pp. 1–2). Nussbaum’s book—*Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*—has become a widely cited element of this debate, but the urgency of the topic has generated numerous books and articles, many of them by distinguished

scholars in a range of venues, from academic journals to leading magazines and newspapers. As Marjorie Perloff put it in an article entitled “Crisis in the Humanities”, “[o]ne of our most common genres today is the epitaph for the humanities” [4]. The phrase itself—crisis in the humanities—has become so familiar that it has begun to appear in scare quotes, along with warnings that just because everyone is saying it, doesn’t mean it isn’t true. “You’ve probably heard several times already that the humanities are in ‘crisis’”, Gordon Hunter and Feisal G. Mohammed wrote in a *New Republic* article entitled “The Real Humanities Crisis Is Happening at Public Universities”, but as their title implies, this doesn’t mean that we should doubt it. “The crisis is real”, they assure us [5]. Few would contradict them. In a column in the *New York Times* that was prompted by the threat of SUNY Albany to close their French, Italian, Classics, Russian and theater programs, Stanley Fish responded to a letter from one of his readers that it “will be a sad, sad day if and when we allow the humanities to collapse” by insisting “that it had already happened”. Fish’s tone of world-weary resignation struck many people as misguided (“I have always had trouble believing in the high-minded case for a core curriculum—that it preserves and transmits the best that has been thought and said—but I believe fully in the core curriculum as a device of employment for me and my fellow humanists”), but his pessimism is widely shared [6]. Robert Weisbuch is on safe ground in his insistence that “today’s consensus about the state of the humanities—it’s bad, it’s getting worse, and no one is doing much about it—is supported by dismal facts” ([7], p. B4). However illustrious their past, the humanities have no future at all, so these epitaphs suggest, and that recognition has put its stamp on our present discussions like few other topics today, the digital revolution not excepted.

The signs of this crisis are everywhere around us. In England, the government’s 2010 decision to cancel funding for the teaching of humanities programs has been doubled by the spirit of intellectual recoil that characterizes its new Research Excellence Framework, which was recently established as the official basis for determining research funding allocations amongst English universities. As Stefan Collini has pointed out, part of this formula for funding allocation depends on what the Research Excellence Framework calls the “impact” of research, a somewhat nebulous concept which the Framework breaks down into thirty-seven categories, each of which is in turn measured by a series of “indicators” such as (to quote the Framework) “creating new businesses”, “commercializing new products or processes”, and “attracting R & D investment from global business” (quoted in [8], p. 18). As Collini points out, the final category, the only one where the work of most humanities scholars might easily be slotted, which is headed “other quality of life benefits”, is unique amongst the thirty-seven in having no examples provided. In place of the sorts of concrete indicators suggested in the other thirty-six examples of research impact, this final one contains a one-line note that merely says: “please suggest what might also be included in this list” (quoted in [8], p. 18). Admittedly, the “impact” score accounts for only 20% of the overall assessment (likely to rise to 25% in the next REF cycle); publications in scholarly journals of “high quality” still weigh far more heavily. But this inability to imagine the “impact” or usefulness of the humanities is a chilling index of a broader failure of the same kind. These institutional pressures are also taking more insidious forms, such as the current shift within the U.K. to an emphasis on “open access” publishing. Few would disagree with the intrinsic worth of this idea in the abstract, but the fact that publishing costs will be downloaded to researchers has opened the door to further problems by enabling universities to target which areas of research will receive support to offset these costs.

Evidence of these problems is just as hard to miss in Canada, where I live and work, from the federal government's \$7 million cut to SSHRC¹ funding in 2012 (all of which was replaced by targeted funding emphasizing collaboration with industry, or more broadly, non-academic partners); to the cancellation of the Ontario Research Fund, including the special round for the Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities; to the growing sway of a narrow cluster of research priorities (health, environment, and digital technologies) and a rhetorical emphasis on addressing "real-life problems" within universities' strategic plans. It is borne out, over and over again, in the closure of university departments and programs, the budget cuts, and the general climate of suspicion that have become part of our day-to-day experience. In 2013, the University of Alberta announced that it had suspended admission to twenty humanities programs. An editorial entitled "Liberal Arts and Commercial Utility" in the *Globe and Mail* (Canada's leading national newspaper) epitomized this reactionary climate in its warning that "the liberal arts are necessary and good, but not sufficient in the modern age" ([9], p. F8). If, as Percy Shelley once famously complained, poets had been challenged "to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists", this same tension has reemerged today in the face of a new utilitarianism ([10], p. 131).

But as serious as these problems are, it is important to recognize that they are not reducible to a growing antagonism to the humanities alone. Scientists within and outside of universities have been equally outraged by what they regard as an unprecedented attack on the idea of curiosity-driven abstract research: the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself. In December 2012, hundreds of leading scientists in lab coats marched in front of Parliament Hill to protest being muzzled by a government that is mistrustful of any sort of research that is not in step with their business agenda. Five months later, John McDougall, the Calgary businessman who serves as President of Canada's National Research Council (once a highly respected body of scientific researchers) made headlines by insisting that "innovation is not valuable unless it has commercial value". McDougall's comments were part of an announcement of a broader shift in the NRC's focus towards research the government deems "commercially viable" [11]. As an editorial about the fate of the NRC in the *Toronto Star* put it, "once a bastion of pure research—exploratory science no business would pay for but which is essential to eventual innovation—the agency has been redesigned to respond to industry requests, its \$900-million budget effectively transformed into a business subsidy" [12]. Within universities, this attack on pure research is part of an underlying tendency to thinking about the role of the university in more narrowly vocational terms as an institution whose primary role is to ensure that graduates secure well-paying jobs. Months after McDougall's announcement, the ACCUTE² president, Stephen Slemon, warned that as sharply as the humanities have felt the burden of financial cuts, it is crucial to recognize this wider context: "we are *all* under attack. I don't know anyone now working in any of the postsecondary human or natural sciences who does not feel institutionally threatened" [13].

As Slemon suggests, it is important to recognize the extent to which the crisis in the humanities today is intensified by this double threat: a shift away from the humanities towards STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) that is compounded by a broader resistance to curiosity-driven research in both the arts and the sciences. Worse, as critics such as Collini and Thomas Docherty have

¹ SSHRC, or the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, is the main source of research funding for academics working in the humanities and social sciences.

² The Association of Canadian College and University Teachers in English is in many ways the Canadian equivalent of the MLA.

recently argued, this double problem is further intensified by a growing suspicion of universities generally [14,15]. “At a moment when the number of students currently enrolled in these institutions across the globe is several times larger than was the case only a generation ago, there is unprecedented skepticism about the benefits (both intellectual and material) of a university education” ([14], p. 3). Based within institutions that are increasingly underfunded, besieged by a growing insistence on the exclusive worth of “commercially viable” research, and rooted in the most vulnerable side of the disciplinary divide *within* universities, support for the humanities has been weakened by a growing skepticism about any sort of research that cannot be converted into short term market-based applications, and any sort of education that is unlikely to lead to good jobs. (It seems to do little good to cite studies that indicate that humanities graduates fare equally well in their subsequent careers, even if it the transition from university to a good job takes slightly longer.) “The liberal arts are necessary and good”, the saying goes, but clearly “not sufficient in the modern age”. The best of times and the worst of times, for sure.

2. Past Debates

These problems, however, also constitute an important opportunity: a chance to re-imagine our answers to questions about the nature and role of the humanities, their potential benefits to contemporary life, and how we might channel these benefits back into the larger society. The good news is that in many ways, this self-reflexive challenge is precisely what the humanities have always done best: highlight the nature and the force of the narratives that have helped to define how we understand our society—its various pasts and its possible futures—and to suggest the larger contexts within which these issues must ultimately be situated. In his introduction to *The Public Value of the Humanities*, Jonathan Bate points out that:

one of the values of the humanities is that it teaches us that all controversies have historical precedents—the lessons of which we are very good at ignoring. The debate between those who look for the ‘economic impact’ of academic research and those who appeal to the pursuit of knowledge as a civilizing virtue replicates a dichotomy identified by John Stuart Mill in the early Victorian era, in his pair of essays on Jeremy Bentham (written in 1838) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1840) ([16], p.10).

As Bate points out, Mill’s aim in these essays was to emphasize a lesson that was “given to mankind by every age, and always disregarded—to show that speculative philosophy, which to the superficial appears a thing so remote from the business of life and the outward interests of men, is in reality the thing which most influences them, and in the long run overbears every other influence save those which it must itself obey” (quoted in [16], p. 10). Gesturing to similar parallels between nineteenth-century debates and today’s crisis in confidence about the worth of the humanities, Francis O’Gorman agrees that “it is one of the small advantages for literary and cultural historians that they know the place of the arts and humanities in national education has been debated before” ([17], p. 272). A sense of crisis can encourage a narrowing of focus to present-day difficulties at the expense of a longer historical perspective, but as Bate and O’Gorman rightly point out, the question of the role of the humanities has been debated in remarkably similar ways before, and in the face of similar pressures. What interests me is the long history of this crisis and the insights that this might have to offer about our own predicament

today. History repeats itself, but never in quite the same way: knowing more about past debates will provide a crucial basis for moving forward as universities, and the humanities in particular, position themselves to respond to new social, economic, technological, and cultural challenges during an age of radical change.

The single most important aspect of this history may be the fact that the humanities emerged in their modern form during an age not unlike our own, in which leading activists such as Bentham and James Mill resisted any vision of reform that was not driven by a central recognition of the importance of applied knowledge. For utilitarians such as Thomas Love Peacock (a poet himself in earlier days), the poet was “a waster of his own time, and a robber of that of others”, whose cultivation of poetry had been “to the neglect of some branch of useful study”, in stark contrast with the tendency of “the thinking and studious, and scientific and philosophical part of the community” to draw on “the materials of useful knowledge” in order to prepare one’s self for “the real business of life” ([18], pp. 578–79). These sorts of views are crucial for two reasons. Utilitarians’ hostility to poetry (and to imaginative expression generally) represented a challenge that would help to define the struggle to articulate a role for the humanities at the precise historical moment when the idea of culture was crystallizing into its modern form. But just as importantly, the utilitarians were themselves reformers eager to effect social change, which made the challenge of responding to their hostile ideas about the social worth of poetry especially urgent. As with today, it was never a debate between reformers and reactionaries, but about what forms of knowledge production mattered amongst those people who shared a commitment to social and political improvement.

The crisis that forces us to make the case for the humanities today in the face of similar pressures to focus on “useful knowledge” that is suited to “the real business of life” can best be answered with a clearer understanding of the ways that ideas about the humanities were forged in the crucible of this spirit of intellectual reaction which defined itself in terms of the unique importance of more “serious” forms of knowledge. For early nineteenth-century advocates such as Shelley, William Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt, the arts constituted a central aspect of a larger struggle for social progress, but like today, these arguments were themselves sharpened by the need to challenge a utilitarian emphasis on the primacy of applied knowledge. These writers anticipated Albert Einstein’s famous comment that “imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand” ([19], p. 97). But they did so in a polemical spirit that was animated by the need to make a case for the importance of the humanities in the face of a backlash against the value of imaginative expression.

Those writers who sought to make a case for the arts responded in a range of ways, from Hazlitt’s and Thomas Carlyle’s vehement opposition to utilitarianism’s reductive moral calculus, to Hunt’s and John Stuart Mill’s efforts to forge some degree of common ground, to Francis Jeffrey’s struggle to adapt the legacy of Scottish Enlightenment accounts of sympathy to the demands of an industrial society. Shelley’s response, which was in many ways the most radical and the most theoretically sophisticated of his age, and which it has become crucial to make again, if in slightly different terms, was that poetry—or today, the humanities—must be understood, not as the opposite but at the limits of applied knowledge: a larger perspective that enables us “to imagine that which we know”, in part by highlighting the “unapprehended relations” within which particular innovations must be situated ([10], pp. 111, 134). Poetry, he argued, offers a potential for insight into the nature and limits of applied knowledge capable

of extending the transformative power of reason by setting reason against itself in a self-reflexive turn which belongs to the province of the imagination. The implication of Shelley's argument was that poetry was the more important or "useful" form of knowledge, even in Peacock's rigidly utilitarian terms, but if Shelley's insistence on the importance of fostering larger critical contexts within which to think about these issues ("imagin[ing] that which we know") is just as relevant today as it was two hundred years ago, his intervention is equally instructive in another way as well.

Our sense of crisis has helped to foster an energetic and sophisticated debate about the nature and value of the humanities but it is worth emphasizing that a crisis mentality has risks of its own. Besieged on all sides, it can be hard to resist a set of sometimes counterproductive consolatory narratives about why the humanities matter, many of which either view our neglect as an ironic badge of honor—the fact that we remain proudly out of step with the larger vocational and commercial spirit of our age—or which simply reverse the kinds of intellectual prejudices that we are protesting against. W. H. Auden's claim that "poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/ In the valley of its making where executives/ Would never want to tamper" is understandably tempting, especially given many corporate executives' evident lack of concern for poetry, but this sort of special pleading for some rarified position sheltered from the corrupting influence of the world will not ultimately help us to develop an adequate response to the crisis in the humanities today [20].

Posing the question, "What, then, can be done?" Fish warns "it won't do to invoke the pieties" that have become familiar elements of this debate: "the humanities enhance our culture; the humanities make our society better—because those pieties have a 19th century air about them and are not even believed in by some who rehearse them" [6]. Alex Usher, the author of a popular on-line column offered by the Higher Education Strategy Associates, puts it even more bluntly. Taking issue with the kinds of positions espoused by Rosanna Warren in her *New Republic* article, "The Decline of the Humanities—and Civilization", which imply that the humanities have some sort of monopoly on teaching people "what it is to be fully human", Usher warns against the reaction that this kind of self-aggrandizing claim produces: "Honestly, how self-absorbed, smug, self-righteous and arrogant does one have to be to believe that one's own work is solely responsible for the maintenance of all human progress since the Renaissance? After reading it, I actively wanted to go around, eliminating random humanities departments out of sheer spite" [21]. It is worth adding that Usher has nothing against humanities programs, but his response is both understandable and illuminating: arguments which imply that the humanities are somehow inherently superior to other intellectual fields, or that those people who have not benefited from a humanities education are not "fully human" (even if they mistakenly think they are) are inevitably going to rub people the wrong way.

Which brings us back to Shelley's *Defense of Poetry*, a polemic that, read superficially, seems to epitomize the self-righteous strain that Usher objects to in Warner's argument. Stung by Peacock's diatribe against poetry, Shelley fought back by insisting on the paramount importance of those committed to the task of "enlarg[ing] our imagination" or, as critics might put it today, helping us "to be fully human" ([10], p. 132). Had "reasoners" such as Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau and their disciples never struggled on behalf of "oppressed and deluded humanity", Shelley allowed, "a little more nonsense would have been talked for a century or two; and perhaps a few more men, women and children, burnt as heretics. We might not at this moment have been congratulating each other on the abolition of the Inquisition in Spain" ([10], p. 132). These reforms were all good things, Shelley

acknowledged, but in comparison with their limited impact, “it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon, nor Milton, had ever existed; if Raphael and Michael Angelo had never been born; if the Hebrew poetry had never been translated; if a revival of the study of Greek literature had never taken place; if no monuments of ancient sculpture had been handed down to us” ([10], p. 132).

It sounds awful, of course, a high-water mark in “self-absorbed, smug, self-righteous and arrogant” responses to anyone who would dare to criticize the importance of the arts or humanities. Who cares if a few more or less “oppressed and deluded” people die cruel and unnecessary deaths compared with the horror of living in a world without Shakespeare and Milton. Except that Shelley is a step ahead of us. His real point, as he quickly makes clear, is not that the “higher truths” offered by those individuals blessed with artistic genius trumps social reform but that this latter group—the “promoters of utility”—are in danger of intervening in ways that are ultimately counterproductive because they have been blinded by their uncritical faith in the force of reason and the sufficiency of applied knowledge. Having neglected the task of “enlarg[ing] their imagination”, they have failed to ask the more serious questions about both the unexamined assumptions and unintended consequences of their efforts. Their uncritical commitment to an eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century form of technological determinism left them exposed to the danger of what Shelley denounced as “the abuse of all invention for abridging and combining labor, to the exasperation of the inequality of mankind” ([10], p. 134). His reference, of course, was to the disastrous effects of that best and worst innovation of the industrial age known as the assembly line, which works precisely through abridging and combining labor. The opening pages of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* featured a reverential depiction of the almost magical force of a proper division of labor in something as “trifling” as a pin factory, in which the work is “divided into about eighteen distinct operations” ([22], pp. 14–15). All that was needed was that the workers be “collected”, where the scale of the operation allowed, “into the same workhouse” ([22], p. 14), an arrangement that was central to what Smith lauded as the task of “reducing every man’s business to some one simple operation, and ... making this operation the sole employment of his life” ([22], p. 18). Lest we should be in danger of missing the fact that this is what he too has in mind, Shelley repeats himself in an almost identical description four paragraphs later:

Whilst the mechanist abridges, and the political economist combines, labor, let them beware that their speculations, for want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination, do not tend, as they have in modern England, to exasperate at once the extremes of luxury and want ([10], p. 132).

Shelley’s argument was not ultimately with social activists’ struggle to achieve political reform (his polemic, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, tended to regard them in more generous terms as important allies in the struggle for social progress) but with the dangerous lack of perspective that uncritical ideas about reason as an engine of progress and technology as an inherently beneficial force implied: the unintended “abuse” of new forms of instrumentalist knowledge.

Shelley’s concern here is about fundamental social realities rather than higher spiritual truths, about economics rather than aesthetics: about the sorts of issues which ought to have been more forcefully championed by Enlightenment reformers, had they thought imaginatively enough about the impact of

their own struggles. The reformist dream of rational progress had collapsed into a utilitarianism which, despite its triumphalist rhetoric, only reinforced existing inequalities. Knowledge had fallen prisoner to the very historical forces that it had presumed to challenge; history remained the nightmare that reformers were struggling to wake up from. Or as Shelley rather unpoetically put it, “the rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer” ([10], p. 132). His point was not that Enlightenment reformers’ efforts had not mattered but rather that they had been undermined by the tendency of their very success to overshadow the larger sorts of questions that would help to ensure their ongoing social good. Poetry (or the arts) offered a radical extension of the critical impulse associated with reason, an amplification rather than a negation of its transformative power (or “impact”) which insists on the primacy of a much broader sense of the “unapprehended relations” within which particular developments must be situated ([10], p. 111).

Nor, for Shelley, was this merely a historical coincidence. On the contrary, it was precisely the breathtaking pace of change that had fostered this faith in technology as an end in itself. People had lost perspective, which is the real danger in times of rapid and fundamental change: “We have more moral, political and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these systems of thought, is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes” ([10], p. 134). The problem lay in an imbalance between applied and self-reflexive knowledge: “a cultivation of the mechanical arts in a degree disproportioned to the presence of the creative faculty... From what other cause has it arisen that these inventions which should have lightened, have added a weight to the curse imposed on Adam?” ([10], p. 134).

Shelley’s critique amounts to an early version of the argument that Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would offer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that the progress of enlightened thought tended, by its very nature, to undermine itself because its very successes weakened the all-important tension between these two very different kinds of knowledge: the technological field of applied expertise and a critical self-reflexiveness (Shelley’s “poetic faculty”) that ought to pose questions about the larger context within which instrumentalist advances ought to be situated [23]. Horkheimer and Adorno were ultimately pessimistic about the possibility of reversing this process, but for Shelley, the poetic imagination was also a form of praxis, simultaneously a set of critical insights and a force that would generate the impulse to put these into action: “We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine” ([10], p. 134). Nor was this task altogether difficult, had people the will to do so: “There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy, or at least, what is wiser and better than what men now practice and endure. But we let ‘*I dare not wait upon I would*, like the poor cat in the adage’” ([10], p. 134).

3. Future Roles

This emphasis on poetry as a critical perspective from which to reconsider inherited ideas and as a spur to act on the conclusions this reconsideration suggested may ultimately have been a bit romantic. Poetry may never have possessed the revolutionary power that Shelley suggests. But having said so, it is worth emphasizing the timeliness of Shelley’s argument about the dangers of the scramble to embrace

applied knowledge at the expense of any adequate recognition of larger social and political contexts: the “unapprehended relations” within which these solutions to so-called real-world problems must be situated. And this is where he might well have found an ally in critics such as Usher. Having been challenged by his readers to answer the question of what sort of arguments we might want to make, in place of the self-serving claims for the unique power of the humanities that he had denounced, Usher cites Paul Wells’ argument in his 2010 article, “In Praise of the Squishy Subjects”, that “societal problems are incredibly complex and can’t be explained by simple cause-and-effect, what the humanities do is get people used to the idea of complexity” [24,25]. Especially, one might add, in times when rapid change heightens both the appeal and the dangers of an unexamined faith in innovation. As Stanley Fish rightly warns us, making our case by appealing to values that sound like they belong to another era won’t be much help in our efforts to persuade the broader public of our worth, but ironically, knowing more about the long history of the struggle to make this case may itself be instructive in forging the kinds of arguments that will help as we try to position ourselves in a rapidly changing present.

All of this highlights both the urgency and the complexity of what seem to me to be the most important points that have emerged out of the debates that this crisis in support for the humanities has triggered:

The first and most important is the question of how we make the case for the humanities to people outside of our own academic community. How do we avoid the trap of simply preaching to the converted? We are bedevilled by the paradox that the positions that will likely be the most popular amongst us, even when we get these arguments right, may be hardest to convey to the broader public in any really convincing way. Wells is absolutely right that what may seem like the most necessary strategy—clambering onto the rhetorical bandwagons of the day—won’t get us very far. Citing arguments made by Noreen Golfman (then president of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Science) “about the contribution of social sciences and humanities research to innovation, and to our nation’s ability to compete globally and be an effective partner in the international community”, in part “by stimulating the need for economic recovery in the short term and by shaping the broader prospects for Canada’s future”, Wells rightly dismisses these arguments as unconvincing gestures to short-term thinking (quoted in [25]). They sound both opportunistic and, what may be worse, tedious. But they do clarify the importance of forging arguments that we can believe in in ways that will resonate with people outside of our own academic community. A bit of history, which is one of the things that we can bring to the discussion, can help a lot. The other side of this question is the issue of how far can we push the argument that the self-reflexive space of critical thinking fostered by the humanities offers a more useful form of knowledge than other “commercially viable” forms without surrendering to the utilitarian or vocational logic that this argument is intended to resist. But do we have a choice?

My other points emerge from this initial one. The first is that we need to be wary of the intellectual cost of the arguments that we have been forced into making, over and over and over again, in favour of the humanities. It’s not that these arguments aren’t legitimate (I think they are). And it is definitely not the case that we don’t have to make them. But in being forced to make them so repeatedly and so defensively, we can travel down an intellectual dead-end that does as much harm as it does good. Here’s a simple if anecdotal way of explaining what I mean: I became Chair of an English department a little over six years ago in a Faculty that includes both the arts and social sciences. At the time, the mood was expansive and intellectually generous: the real emphasis was on the common ground between those two

groups. That never really changed, but by the time I stepped down as Chair this past year, our talk had been hijacked by an embattled sense of how to make the case for the humanities in the face of a climate, both within and outside of the university, that does not seem to place much value in what we do. It's not that we fell out with our colleagues on the social sciences side of the fence—the opposite was true, much to their credit—but in defending the humanities, we had been forced into focusing on a set of far less interesting conversations.

The trickiest question may lie in the unexamined tension between the humanities as a field of critical analysis and humanism as an inherited set of cultural values. How we can make a case for the humanities in ways that do not depend on what many of us now regard as the outmoded assumptions that were central to traditional models of humanism? This is the most fundamental question that confronts us: do we know what we mean by “the humanities” in an age when most of us who work in the area no longer align ourselves with the humanist ideals that provided our disciplines' rationale as they emerged in their modern form in the nineteenth century. It is not simply that, as Fish points out, these “pieties”—“the humanities enhance our culture; the humanities make our society better”—no longer strike us convincing; they seem to be bound up with a highly conservative deference to authority and resistance to activist intervention that has the potential to be deeply reactionary [6]. We avoid them, not because we're embarrassed by their dated feel, but because we're suspicious of their political implications. We may no longer need to explain the problems that an Arnoldian humanist rhetoric about the disinterested contemplation of universal truths entailed, but our rejection of it does raise the thorny question of what we actually *mean* by the humanities today, in an age that is increasingly uncomfortable with inherited definitions of the term “humanism”. It raises the question of how we can make that case to the broader public, if not to our senior administrators, without appearing to be either self-contradictory or just intellectually dishonest. To put this more constructively, how might we begin to theorize a new “new humanism”—not the highly conservative school of thought which became known as the new humanism in the first half of the twentieth century, but one that takes an honest engagement with these tensions as its starting point without abandoning the political impulse that helped to fuel critiques of humanism in the name of a historically grounded politics of difference in recent decades?

Rather than confronting this dilemma as a problem, it may be more accurate and more productive to recognize it as a valuable starting-point as we position ourselves to answer the question of the future role of the humanities. If we rid ourselves of the baggage of the sorts of outmoded “pieties” that Fish cautions us against, which include the idea that the humanities have a singular ability to make us “fully human”, we can concentrate on Paul Wells' point, which Usher rightly endorses and which has become a central aspect of the many discussions that this crisis has prompted, that the humanities train us to be more fully engaged with the issues of our day. This emphasis on fostering engaged forms of citizenship, which epitomizes what has become known as the ethical turn in the work of theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, has been especially true of recent debates about globalization, which have highlighted the ways that the relentless traffic of ideas and bodies, goods and wealth, pipelines and pollutants, across borders and oceans has produced both new cultural formations *and* reinvigorated hegemonic orders. An insistence on the importance of recognizing the simultaneity of both of these aspects of our modernity—the growing possibilities of collaboration on the one hand *and* the persistent forms of economic exploitation and the cultural dissonance between incommensurable traditions and value systems on the other—has been a hallmark of these debates. But this emphasis on encouraging a

comfort with complexity as a basis of new forms of engagement has been equally central to a range of other questions, from the efforts of posthumanist critics such as Cary Wolfe to complicate debates about animal rights, to the ways that the concept of “geological agency” proposed by Dipesh Chakrabarty have enabled us to reframe environmental issues, to Marxist critiques of neoliberalism. Running through all of these has been an emphasis on the importance of embracing those forms of complexity that flourish in times of fundamental change when it is no longer possible to deal with emerging problems using inherited methodologies.³

Offering “a reminder that you can never know what you’ll need to know”, and that it can therefore never be enough to work hard to “figure out the answers to important questions” without adequately considering if they are the right questions, or if they have been formulated in the most helpful ways, Wells points out that what really matters is the challenge of fostering a climate where irreducible complexity is welcome:

Very few of the problems our society faces admit to narrow technical solutions. There is no genome for crime or poverty or the listless emptiness that comes from punching a time clock. There is no subatomic particle which, once discovered and mapped, will coax a song into giving up its secrets or make the subjunctive verb tense easier to conjugate. These things are mysteries and they will remain mysteries right to the heart of them. It is helpful, then, to have people around who are used to mystery [25].

For Wells (and Usher) this is where the humanities have an important role to play:

If you spend a few years wrestling with the idea of society as propounded by Hobbes, Locke, Mill, Rousseau and Marx, you come away with a better understanding of all the alternative ways our own society might choose to configure itself, with their attendant risks. If you study the fur trade in British North America, you learn something lasting about the contribution of aboriginal Canadians to our politics and economics, and you begin to understand the behaviour of today’s Canadian businesses a little better. Read Goethe or Cervantes in the original and you understand things about Germany and Spain today that Goethe and Cervantes cannot have imagined [25].

It may not even be the case that a humanities education will be useful because it offers a kind of soft version of applied knowledge: a training in all of those things that you didn’t know would help you to address particular problems but did—a history of the fur trade as an illuminating perspective on Canadian business, or of political theory on questions about public policy. It can do that, for sure. Even more fundamentally, and maybe more importantly, by teaching us to be comfortable with complexity, and by encouraging us to realize that complexity is a central characteristic of our world rather than something that needs to be reduced out of existence, it can train us to be more genuinely engaged citizens in a world that is going through extraordinary changes. In doing so, the humanities will indeed play a

³ For arguments about globalization, see for instance, Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* [26], Bruce Robbins, *Perpetual War: Cosmopolitanism From The Viewpoint Of Violence* [27], and Robbins and Pheng Cheah, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking And Feeling Beyond The Nation* [28]. For posthumanist interventions in animal rights debates, see for instance, Cary Wolfe, *Zoontologies: The Question Of The Animal* [29]. For the concept of “geological agency”, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses” [30].

vital role in helping us to “come away with a better understanding of all the alternative ways our own society might choose to configure itself, with their attendant risks”, not just by exposing us to particular historical theories, options, and experiments, but by enlarging our imaginations in ways that incline us to think about the sorts of “unapprehended relations” that can have a more important influence—both positive and negative—than some of the more obvious but limited aspects of our debates.

Will this knowledge come in handy? Will it have direct application in some lucrative enterprise? It might well. Stranger things have happened. In the meantime, this sort of study instills in the student an appreciation for the richness of our human enterprise. It shows that the way we live is not the way we have always lived, nor is it the way everyone lives. It demonstrates the role of ideas and the possibility of massive change. It is harder, having contemplated such things, to go back to a rote existence. Not impossible, but harder [25].

As we struggle with the challenge of facing up to the problems and possibilities of the future, this may be the greatest advantage that the humanities have to offer. They can help us to become intolerant of reductive thinking (though this adds to the importance of resisting unconvincing clichés about stimulus and innovation in the arguments that we pose on our own behalf). They can encourage us to think about new innovations in the context of larger questions about their “utility” or “impact”: who will they help? What might the consequences be? How can these best be addressed? What have we missed when we fixate on the ideas that do seem important to us? The humanities are very definitely not the only place on the disciplinary map where this kind of training goes on, but when it is done well, it plays a vital and in many ways unique role in cultivating this atmosphere of engaged citizenship in which insisting on the stubborn importance of questions may be as profitable as a struggle to come up with the sorts of answers that can too easily descend into technical fine-tuning. Their ability to make us more comfortable with complexity and more focused on the “unapprehended” implications of the kinds of research that we are prioritizing may even lessen the danger of “exasperat[ing]...the extremes of luxury and want” that remain stubbornly in place two centuries after Shelley’s *Defense*. In a utilitarian age marked by the scramble to embrace “commercially viable” forms of knowledge, that is a point worth making.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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