

# ARTS *of* LIVING

Reinventing  
the Humanities for the  
Twenty-first Century

Kurt Spellmeyer

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the Twenty-first Century

Kurt Spellmeyer

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## PART I

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## Taking the Humanities Out of the Box

The argument of this book is that the humanities must change. It may seem absolutely unthinkable that our enjoyment of the arts might abruptly die away, or that we might no longer take an interest in the past or ask ourselves what it means to be alive, but the unthinkable is now a possibility. Even if the humanities should somehow survive, we have no reason to assume that they will be best served by our traditional institutions, in particular the schools and the university. While the humanities as taught and studied today may appear to be perennial and changeless, we should remind ourselves that in their current form as modern professions they have existed for less than a hundred years, and precariously at that.<sup>1</sup> Until the turn of the nineteenth century, the most important branches of the humanities were not English and history, probably the leading fields now, but rhetoric and classics. Within the short space of a generation, these two disciplines, seemingly irreplaceable, collapsed.<sup>2</sup> The first vanished altogether until quite recently, after periodic efforts to revive it; the second has limped on in a greatly diminished state. The same fate could overtake our leading disciplines now.

That the humanities *are* in crisis everybody understands. In our colleges and universities, the last thirty years have seen steadily declining enrollments while the number of majors has doubled, even tripled, in business programs, information sciences, and other fields.<sup>3</sup> Tenured faculty positions have also disappeared, by some estimates cut nearly in half, while university budgets have increased more than eightfold over the same period.<sup>4</sup> But the crisis is not only a matter of numbers. People working in the humanities, especially professors in the key disciplines of philosophy, history, and literary studies, have witnessed an alarming erosion of their influence in a broader sense. Many of these people can remember a time when the humanities seemed to occupy a central place in the life of their culture as a whole. Now, the center seems to be monopolized by the frenzied rush for wealth and the evanescent pleasures offered up by the popular media. While the economic growth of the last fifty years, unprecedented in American history, has enriched and expanded many social institutions, the humanities go begging.

Instead of addressing these problems, our humanists have divided into warring camps over issues that are largely symbolic—and misconceived. No observer of contemporary American life can ignore the persistence and bitterness of the “culture wars.” Conservatives like Jacques Barzun, Harold Bloom, and the late Allan Bloom

have all decried what they see as an assault on the stainless monuments of Western thought. At the same time, from the legions of left-leaning academics—the “tenured radicals” of Roger Kimball’s polemic—comes a seemingly endless procession of arcane critiques, pompous manifestos, and tendentious revisionary histories.<sup>5</sup> At no prior moment in the last century, not even in the worst years of the Great Depression, has the line dividing American intellectuals appeared more sharply drawn.

The crisis now appears so intractable because both sides insist on misrepresenting the other in crude, moralizing terms, without any serious attempt to explore the social and intellectual history behind our current dilemmas—including the decline of the humanities themselves. And both sides keep looking resolutely backward, conservatives pleading for the same great books, while radicals want the great books as well, though as targets for a harsh “interrogation” rather than as sacred icons. The culture wars notwithstanding, the crisis in the humanities has not been caused by our teaching, or failing to teach, certain books. The humanities are in trouble because they have become increasingly isolated from the life of the larger society. And in fact, throughout the twentieth century, they have chosen isolation again and again, as they continue to do now.

This is not, of course, the story most humanists tell about themselves. Sympathetic observers typically see the crisis in unambiguous terms as an undeserved misfortune. One of these observers, the sociologist Robert Bellah, speaks for many when he attributes the humanities’ decline to the decisive triumph of business, “unrestrained laissez-faire capitalism.”<sup>6</sup> What this triumph has done, in Bellah’s view, is to exclude moral judgment from the conduct of our affairs, not only in the use of new technologies like genetic engineering, but also in our political and cultural lives. Capitalism, according to Bellah, values nothing but self-advancement, and its proponents dismiss as naïve or fraudulent all appeals to disinterested knowledge, long the mainstay of the humanities. In his criticism of the market’s crassness, Bellah calls for our return to a more traditional division of intellectual labor, one that will again lift the humanities above other forms of knowledge. Whereas science, technology, and the economic fields offer their best service to society when they restrict themselves to instrumental concerns, Bellah argues that the humanities are uniquely equipped to deal with questions of a higher kind. The sciences and technical fields may tell us how we can concretely achieve our goals, but the humanities alone enable us to decide which goals are truly worth achieving. In the collective body politic, the sciences may be the brains and technology the hands, but the humanities should be the heart and soul.

Ultimately, Bellah offers us an easy choice—between the darkness and the light, between vices and virtues, between our baser instincts and our higher natures. But the matter is not actually so simple. A large body of evidence, too large to dismiss unthinkingly, suggests that the market system has made possible a higher degree of human happiness than ever existed in ages past, when bleak privation and relentless toil made up the human lot. Most people have already forgotten that famine was still an occurrence in some parts of Western Europe well into the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In the United States prior to industrialization, the average male

could expect to live to about fifty; today, that figure has increased by almost thirty years, thanks to innovations in public health that almost certainly would not have happened without the much-maligned market. While it is true that economic development does not necessarily bring happiness, numerous surveys indicate that the great majority of Americans find their working lives so rewarding that more than half of them would chose to stay on the job beyond retirement age.<sup>8</sup> Although the shocks of industrial development tore apart our agrarian civilization, reconstructing it in ways often violently opposed by ordinary citizens, this same process also brought new freedoms in its wake. The explosive growth of the middle class and the democratization of schooling and material goods were market-driven developments. And if gender and racial equality should someday become the norm, that achievement will owe as much to the culture of trade, in which every person is a customer regardless of his background or complexion, as it will to the culture of arts and letters.

The market is not all darkness; the humanities are not all sweetness and light. No one can responsibly claim that the modern academic humanities have consistently pursued the common good. Even today, when professors tend to regard themselves as leaders of progressive social change, the army is far better integrated than the faculty of all but a few universities.<sup>9</sup> For much of this century, many academic humanists regarded the spread of access to higher education and the growing cultural power of the middle class with distrust if not outright hostility. Virtually every generation of professors since the end of the nineteenth century has looked back longingly to a time when admissions were more selective, students better prepared, and the study of high culture more richly rewarded than in the fallen latter days. Another way to put it might be to say that every generation of professors has had to educate the children of their social inferiors, and every generation has lamented that development. At the same time, professors have deplored, and often still deplore, the rise of movies, the recording industry, and that Great Satan of the academics—television—although these media have actually occasioned something like a Renaissance, except that no prior civilization in history, not even Europe's Renaissance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, produced art and knowledge of such high quality on such a massive scale. Of course, people have been carefully conditioned never to think along these lines. To equate magazine ads with Renaissance paintings is a kind of sacrilege. To speak in the same breath of Shakespeare and *ER*, or Chopin and David Bowie, is to court derision. Yet the cultural achievements of the twentieth century, no less than the century's achievements in science, are in many ways the most remarkable of all time, as perhaps our children or grandchildren will be ready to acknowledge.

In his defense of the humanities Bellah helps to perpetuate a myth the humanities themselves have created: that the schools and universities are the proper home of our best art and ideas. And at first glance, the myth's truth appears self-evident. After all, whatever most of us know about Mary Cassatt and Pablo Picasso, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, Edgar Varèse and John Cage, we learned from college classes and the writings of professors. But the classroom and the textbook have agendas of their own, and in those settings the achievements of a Faulkner or a

Cassatt can appear to belong to places far removed from our own pedestrian lives, when the very opposite is actually the case. William Faulkner had a tenth-grade education, followed later by a year at a state university. He worked as a day laborer, a rural postmaster, a school janitor, and after gaining some recognition, a screenwriter in Hollywood. Until he got to Hollywood, Faulkner probably never made more than \$6,000 a year.<sup>10</sup> Next to writing and drinking, his greatest passion was hunting. As Faulkner's finest novels appeared in an astonishing burst of creativity from 1928 to 1936, several distinguished critics of the day, inside the academy as well as outside, wrote about his work dismissively. Somehow Faulkner managed to continue, transforming into fiction of extraordinary depth and beauty the materials provided by life in rural Mississippi, hardly the setting one might expect to produce art of the highest caliber. But where is the proper home of the arts and ideas? Is it Harvard or Yale? Oxford or the Sorbonne? Clearly, creativity and insight can arise anywhere, and so in fact they have. Yet some might say that institutions we have created to safeguard the achievements of Faulkner and others do much to obscure that fact.

The truth is that the modern humanities have largely taken up residence in the university, and there they have remade themselves into specialized professions on the model of physics or medicine. As a consequence, they have a powerful vested interest in persuading us that the arts and ideas come from far away and are created by humans quite unlike ourselves. The arts as scholars often represent them seem remote and difficult, demanding almost superhuman levels of erudition, but such qualities have less to do with the arts themselves than they do with the need to make distinctions between the experts and the amateurs. We might say that the academic humanities use the work of Faulkner, Pollock, and the rest to create a specialized, often rarified knowledge that justifies not only the privileged vantage point of critical judgment, but also tenured positions, research stipends, federal grants, and so on. I believe that most nonspecialists revere a novel like Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or a painting like Georgia O'Keeffe's *Sky Above Clouds IV*, because these works have the power to speak to each of us individually, as if they were actually addressed to us, created for us. Although academic critics in recent years have done much to discredit the idea that works of art possess a universal relevance, we know from our own experience that a novel or a painting, a play or a poem sometimes has the *feel* of universality, the feel, almost, of timelessness. And when a reader shares in this condition, lifted out of real time into Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Márquez's village of Macondo, or into the sky above O'Keeffe's New Mexico, who can be blamed for concluding that this is, after all, the reason that novels and paintings exist?

While Bellah implies that the public has deserted the humanities, we might just as easily argue that the public has been quietly edged out by the "middle men." But the middle men are not always professors. Lovers of classical music may bemoan the catastrophic decline of stations devoted to their tastes, but the nonaficionado who just happens to tune in is bound to be struck by the stilted diction of the program "hosts" and the absurdly grave tone of the proceedings: even funerals might be livelier. Worse yet, innovators are often harshly criticized, as when one well-known Los Angeles station tried to attract a wider and younger audience by

interspersing classical music with jazz, world music, and “golden oldies.” For some musicians and amateur devotees, the experiment amounted to nothing less than a hideous sacrilege, an attack on the whole tradition.<sup>11</sup> The truth, however, is that Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi, and other well-regarded composers wanted to reach a wide audience and were eager to play “medleys” of their “greatest hits.”<sup>12</sup> Of course, the radio has not been the only battleground between the public and the custodians of culture. Faced with drastic cuts in government support but unwilling to go the way of the classical stations, a number of important museums have reached out to new constituencies with shows more welcoming to nonspecialists. Not long ago, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts broke attendance records and nearly doubled museum membership. But almost as soon as the changes had begun, conservatives on the museum’s board and among the ranks of its curators clamored for the resignation of the new director, Malcolm Rogers, on the grounds that he was “pandering” to the consumer culture.<sup>13</sup> But here, as in the case of music, the image of the arts as aloof and otherworldly is historically inaccurate. Far from regarding popular attention as vulgar, painters like Monet, Degas, and Gauguin took great pleasure in a large attendance at their shows and were gratified, as well, by their percentage of admission fees. Much the same held true in the Amsterdam of Rembrandt and also in the Paris of Matisse and Picasso.<sup>14</sup>

As I will argue in Part I, the humanities have fallen from glory because they have chosen to back the wrong side in the great, unresolved struggle of our time: the struggle waged by ordinary citizens to gain control over their own lives. In the first half of the twentieth century that struggle was aimed primarily at formal participation in government—women’s suffrage is one good example—and then, in the years after World War II, the struggle expanded to include economic security as well as political rights. But the desire for participation does not stop with the vote and a living wage. If culture is where we live, so to speak, if it gives form to our values and extends them into the future, then the promise of democracy remains unrealized so long as most of us are uninvolved in the making of culture itself.

Our direct involvement in the making of culture—this is what the old humanities have failed to achieve and what the new humanities must undertake if they are to have any future at all. Yet the idea that the making of culture is the sort of thing that *should* engage the ordinary person might strike many critics and scholars as absurd, even dangerous. Surely the most accomplished musicians, not the most eager, should get to play with the city orchestra. Surely there are qualitative differences between a poem like William Butler Yeats’s “The Second Coming” and the lyrics on top-forty radio or the verses that self-conscious undergraduates write before they head off to law school. By their very nature, art and democracy are opposites, since anyone can be a citizen and anyone can make a pile of money whereas poets like Yeats come along only once every century or so. To the defenders of this way of thinking, the world of art is necessarily an aristocracy, albeit one of insight, talent, and hard work rather than of birth. And the purpose of scholarship, they tell us, is to protect that aristocracy from the leveling tendencies of the modern world. But are they right? Is it possible instead that our thinking about the arts reflects their origins in an aristocratic outlook we began to abandon politically about



two centuries ago but continue to accept unreflectingly in other contexts? People as widely different as the Balinese, the Navajo, and the pre-Meiji Japanese have regarded the making of art not as the purview of a chosen few, but as a normal part of any life well lived.<sup>15</sup> For these people, the hyperspecialization of the humanities in our society might seem as bizarre as appointing one person in every thousand to experience emotions or to see colors on behalf of everyone else. Clearly, no one can feel emotions or see colors on my behalf, and by the same token, the creativity of others cannot substitute for my own creativity.

Of course, culture, politics, and economics all go together. The struggle for control over cultural life remains one part of a larger conflict, so far unresolved. Ordinary citizens have the right to vote, but ordinary citizens cannot command the same attention from our cash-hungry politicians as a Fortune 500 CEO. Although we enjoy a standard of living our grandparents could never have imagined in their most optimistic moments, many people feel perpetually insecure, their livelihoods abjectly dependent on forces beyond anyone's control—or rather, almost anyone's. Far from leveling social distinctions, the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of new hierarchies: political and economic hierarchies, naturally, but also hierarchies of culture. Without sentimentalizing the past, we might say that our forerunners in the late nineteenth century, at least if they were white, lived in two worlds at once, the world of the town and the world of the nation. They knew firsthand the “small world” of families and neighborhoods, of local businesses, arts, and civil society, on a scale sufficiently circumscribed to allow the common person to play some modest but significant role. At the same time, they understood themselves as belonging to a larger entity, the nation, and perhaps because of their security within the smaller world, they could see themselves as players in the larger world as well. But things have changed dramatically. In the last election of the twentieth century, less than half of eligible voters bothered to go to the polls at all; in the last election of the nineteenth century, participation came quite close to 80 percent in the North.<sup>16</sup> The difference reflects the waning of the smaller world, and the removal of significant authority to places distant, unresponsive, and poorly understood. In fact, with the immanent rise of a global civilization, this same process, this distancing of authority, has entered a new and more ambitious phase, one that threatens to do to the nation-state what the nation-state did a century ago to the village, town, or region. While criticisms of global capital have become a stock-in-trade of the humanities, the humanities themselves have knowingly helped to create the paradigms, the “official” attitudes, that have made hierarchy seem essential to the health of the arts and letters.

The new humanities as I envision them in Part II must contribute to the renewal or remaking of our small worlds, the first step in regaining the power to act in the larger world as well. While the humanities in the last fifteen years have seen a clash between conservatives and radicals—the much publicized culture wars—these “wars” might be viewed instead as a minor skirmish between two competing elites, neither with much of a commitment to broad-based, democratic participation in the making of cultural life. Whether disciples of Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot, or of Karl Marx and his followers, most academic humanists still presuppose that

culture trickles down from the top, or should. Conservatives invoke Tradition with a quavering voice while radicals speak shrilly of combating ruling-class hegemony, but both groups imagine culture as a pyramid, a monolithic system that contains everything and confines everyone, whether or not people consciously acknowledge their containment, and whether or not they collaborate or resist. Needless to say, this image of culture as a pyramid tends to solidify even further the social, economic, and political inequities now in place. It constructs in the realm of ideas an imaginary universe that closely mimics real-world arrangements. But we might think about culture quite differently, in new and potentially more democratic ways.

The first part of this book will retrace the rise of elite professionalism in the humanities. But the second part will explore an alternative to that system, with its representation of culture as a hierarchy or pyramid. Ultimately, I develop a new argument for an idea that originated in the Renaissance, when the old humanities first got their start. In the words of a great philosopher of the time, “The universe is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is infinite.”<sup>17</sup> Or, as I put it in my own words, the heart of the forest always lies wherever we find ourselves. In a genuine democracy, all politics become local politics because the decision making that matters most occurs at the local levels. By the same token, a democratic culture will not teach us to look beyond our actual lives for the solution to our problems: it will remind us instead that solutions of some sort always lie at hand, even when our hands have been tied. Given the degree to which our hands *have* been tied, any discussion of genuine democracy may sound to many ears more fantastic than real, but the loss of faith in our own capacities for action keeps us locked in a vicious circle of dependent thinking that only worsens our real dependency.

The humanities might help us to break out of the circle by reaffirming that the world of immediate human experience is always potentially whole and complete, no matter what our social “betters” happen to claim. Although people living in, say, medieval Europe were far less advanced than we are technologically, we cannot say that our world is necessarily more complete or more alive than theirs. Wholeness, completeness—these are not properties of specific ideas or critical masses of information, but of a certain resonance in our relations to the world. This term “resonance,” which I will explore in Part II, comes not from Renaissance philosophy but from Renaissance science, the rediscovery of harmonics. If I hold a tuning fork to the neck of a guitar and then I pluck a string, the fork will begin vibrate on the same wavelength—vibrating, one might almost say, with the same life. Resonance in the world of culture signifies the achievement of harmony—intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, and sensuous—between our small worlds and the larger one. The deeper our experience of resonance, the more encompassing the small world becomes until it seems to connect us with absolutely everything. To expand the small world outward, to make a home of the universe, this should be the function of culture in general, and of the humanities in particular.

I know that some readers will disagree. They will say that experience is unreliable in itself and that none of us can ever be fully human until we have studied Plato’s dialogues or Shakespeare’s histories. We begin as blank slates on which

culture must write, and the better the culture the better the writing. But Plato never read Plato; Shakespeare never read Shakespeare (nor, in fact, had he read Plato). While I hold both figures in something close to religious awe, our conservatives have gone much too far when they insist that Shakespeare “invented” personal identity or that self-knowledge is “impossible” without at least a minimal command of the *Phaedrus*. Clearly, people in places very far from the Globe Theatre have developed complex forms of self-awareness, as the Japanese classic *The Tale of Genji* testifies. And people utterly ignorant of Plato’s dialectic have traced consciousness back to its roots in ways that outdistanced even Plato himself, as we learn from Indian philosophy. Certainly culture matters, not least because its transmission gives longevity to our attitudes and activities. Yet to say that culture somehow makes us what we are is to treat it quite mistakenly as a big person, something like a god, with intentions and the power to act. In fact, cultures have no intentions and cultures cannot act. It was surely not an accident that Plato and Shakespeare both lived at times of social crisis when culture itself had to be transformed, and they each did so by working outward from the small worlds they knew best, in Plato’s case, Athens, in Shakespeare’s, the stage.

Our left-leaning intellectuals also go too far, if not by raising culture to the status of a god than by treating it as something like the devil, always steering us to perdition when we relax and enjoy ourselves. So completely does culture blind and ensnare—the favored term for “culture” now is “ideology”—that even a visit to Disney World becomes a textbook case of mass mind control. The magic castles and the twirling elephant rides may look innocent enough, but as part of the nefarious “cultural text,” these “signifiers” secretly inculcate us all with the values of a system built on ruthless exploitation. Yet if culture has this power, hypnotic and seemingly irresistible, how can anybody ever wake up from the ruse, even our academic radicals? The short answer is the correct one in this case: experience itself often discloses what culture has concealed or overlooked. Surely no one who works at Disney World for long hours and low pay, and apparently there are quite a few, needs to “decode” the cultural text in order to know that conditions could improve. Surely no one disturbed by forests razed and wetlands drained, and by miles of traffic moving at a walker’s pace in the drenching Florida heat, needs to be lectured on the “social construction” of civilization at the expense of the natural world. Change will come, not when people have learned to distrust the evidence of their daily lives, but when they find the courage and the confidence to see the unimpeachable truth in their own discontents, and also in their own joys.

The proper task of the humanities is to promote this courage and this confidence. I believe that the humanities *will* survive if our schools and universities can offer something that knowledge by itself cannot provide: the experience of freedom, which may be more desperately needed now than any other contribution that humanists can make. But in order to offer real freedom, we need to understand what it concretely entails. In one sense, no society has ever been so free as ours. We can choose our careers. We can live where we want. We can vote, and we can buy more material goods than anyone really needs. We can even change our genders. Yet these freedoms all bring constraint of another kind. The constraints imposed by the

modern administered state, a central concern of my chapters 2 through 5, are not the ones that I mean here. I mean rather the constraint imposed on us by culture itself, which is always limited and limiting: if we believe too much in the values of our particular time and place, we become the prisoner of those values. What happens to our robust self-esteem, for example, when we lose our jobs or the good opinion of our colleagues? What becomes of our faith in the American dream when we can no longer do the work we enjoy, when we go broke, or when our youth and intelligence abandon us? No one can live without a culture, certainly, but to live in culture freely is to live beyond it in a certain sense, remaking it as we go along. Instead of accepting what “they say” as truth, we can expand the smaller world, the personal world, beyond the categories made available to us by our language, history, institutions, and normative practices. Only the person who no longer fears the disapproval of others can be truly generous. Only those who no longer have something to gain can help others without falling prey to the self-aggrandizement that makes compassion into a kind of tyranny. To act without concern about self-image, to think without the fear of making mistakes—this is the freedom the humanities might someday offer us.

The reigning philosophy of the humanities today, the much-praised and much-disparaged movement known as poststructuralism, takes us halfway toward the goal of a democratic culture. More keenly than their predecessors generally did, the poststructuralists appreciate culture’s limitations, its tendency to become paralyzing, even self-destructive, when inhabited inflexibly. Religious wars, conflicts between rival nation-states, colonialism, racial oppression, discrimination based on sexual preference, and the twentieth-century phenomenon of the gulag—all of these demonstrate quite convincingly the potential of culture to diminish the awareness it supposedly enlarges. Instead of seeing values as universal or foundational, the poststructuralists insist on the importance of acknowledging the varied perspectives and social positions that follow from historical differences. At its most extreme, however, poststructuralism militates against any effort to identify genuine commonalities, which it tends to represent ungenerously as an expression of narrow self-interest masquerading as universal benevolence. For some poststructuralists, there can be no fusion between large and small worlds, only many small worlds clashing with one another. One might reply, as I do in Part II, that the suspicious outlook typical of most poststructuralists undermines their own effort, since their claim to unmask self-interest everywhere must itself be a just another mask in the larger charade. But even if the poststructuralists might someday make a better argument for their skepticism than they have so far, their vision of human life could scarcely be bleaker, more repressive, and more alienated, despite their celebrations of playfulness. Some notable poststructuralists have rejected the possibility of genuine equality, of nonviolence, of freedom, of relations unaffected by power; many deny as well that the world in itself, beyond our mediating assumptions, can ever be glimpsed even for a moment; and some insist that it makes no sense to speak of progress, either in the advancement of knowledge or in the arrangements of our practical affairs. Not surprisingly, the thinker most admired by poststructuralists is the nihilist Friedrich Nietzsche, but most poststructuralists are notably less optimistic than the master, who believed that by loosening the grip of culture, humans could live

more healthy and happy lives. For many poststructuralists, by contrast, culture's grip can never be loosened. We are, they tell us, trapped in culture, trapped in language and history, so completely that health and happiness are themselves nothing more than socially constructed "representations," never more than the products of a particular time and place. Strangely, Nietzsche *began* his career by rejecting such claims, always popular among antidemocratic German intellectuals.<sup>18</sup> He understood that this position, like the argument that starts with complete distrust, is inherently self-defeating: the claim that everything is representation can be nothing more than another representation, the narrow outlook of a particular time and place.

The humanities cannot offer freedom if they see human life as nothing more than an "effect" of culture, language, or social structures. Some people have tried to extricate themselves from the chic fatalism of the academy by turning to the American pragmatist tradition, with its emphasis on experience and experimentation. The two foremost pragmatist thinkers today, the philosopher Richard Rorty and the literary critic Stanley Fish, have both argued that the poststructuralists fail to push their thinking to its logical culmination. While poststructuralism repudiates the idea of an objective, immutable truth, it still acts as though such a truth exists when it tries to correct our representations on the basis of history.<sup>19</sup> Like Nietzsche, Rorty and Fish have both argued that history is just another story, a story we can tell in many different ways, depending on our assumptions and aspirations. But the two pragmatists have also pointed out that this program for reforming our ideas gives far too much importance to ideas themselves, which are simply the alibis that people invent after they have decided on a course of action. If we want to change society, they argue, then we need to do less tinkering with ideas and more of the hard work of talking with people, building coalitions, changing institutions, and so on. Instead of trying to ground our reforms on some grand historical vision or some quasi-metaphysical critique, we might do better to ask ourselves about the way of life we would prefer right now, a choice that needs no tighter alibi than that we find it worth pursuing.

It seems to me, however, Fish and Rorty's pragmatism offers only a pale and anemic future for the humanities. Basically, their vision of freedom still leaves us more or less disconnected from other people and from the universe. One way to understand the problem is to say that both thinkers have come to pragmatism *through* the poststructuralist movement, and both men are deeply imbued with its "sophisticated" skepticism. In fact, they might be described as skeptics who simply refuse to turn their doubts into a methodology or program, as many poststructuralists do, because poststructuralism has made such a dogmatic and repressive mess of it, especially in its quasi-Marxist incarnations. Although I often agree with them, I intend to draw my inspiration from other strands in the pragmatist legacy. We should not forget that pragmatism has its roots in Emerson's *transcendentalism*. Emerson tended to treat ideas as relative and contingent precisely because he believed that we all have access to a reality above, or perhaps below, ideas, in contrast to his German contemporaries. As he wrote in "The American Scholar," "Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar's idle times.

When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings."<sup>20</sup> Of course, Emerson's God was not the God of the theologians, but an immanent reality always greater than the conceptions we employ to describe it.<sup>21</sup>

This confidence in a larger wholeness might imbue the humanities with a grandeur and depth—a truly world-embracing resonance—now lacking in the thought of our leading pragmatists, while linking the humanities to traditions that reach beyond the modern West. A familiar image in Chinese culture, roughly comparable in its wide circulation to versions of “the Madonna and Child” in the West, was the “Three Sages,” a standard fixture of temples and scholars' studios. Conventionally these paintings showed three men dressed in the distinctive robes of the major Chinese traditions: the Taoist hermit, the Confucian scholar, and the Buddhist monk. The three stand together in a cluster, smiling and staring up at a moon alone in the clear sky. In Buddhist iconography, the moon symbolizes “Buddha nature,” the “enlightened Mind.” For Taoists, it represents the primordial Great Way, and for Confucianists, *jen*, or humanity.<sup>22</sup> Much like our society today, Tang dynasty China experienced a crisis of multiple and conflicting values, some imported from outside, and some developed internally. The Chinese solution to the problem was not the solution applied by our poststructuralist thinkers—the relentless critique of all values in the name of resistance, transgression, counterhegemony, and revenge. That development would have to await the career of Mao Tse-tung, and when it happened, it left twenty to forty million people dead. But neither did the Chinese adopt the solution proposed by Rorty and Fish, preserving the conventions in an agnostic spirit while living as comfortably as one can. No, the Chinese solution came closer to Emerson's: China's people continued to believe in a “highest truth” beyond contingent expressions, while acknowledging relative truths as well, which were not true in the highest sense, but pragmatically beneficial in particular times and places. While it is certainly the case that this solution did not end all forms of injustices, such as the practice of binding women's feet, the syncretic Chinese outlook might still be said to have produced a more stable and humane society than the West managed to achieve until after World War II, when our colonial domination of the world came to an end.

Whether or not Emerson understood Chinese history well enough to appreciate these parallels, he viewed human culture in much the same spirit, as did his occasional detractor Walt Whitman and also his occasional disciple William James.<sup>23</sup> To appreciate Whitman's celebrations of “the mass man democratic,” or James's explorations of a “pluralistic universe,” is to revisit an opportunity missed by the humanities on this continent. With its commitment to universal truths, validated by discrediting all alternatives, European philosophy was perfectly contrived to consolidate power in the hands of the very few: one party is always right, the others totally wrong, and the right one should get to call the shots. But pragmatists had a very different goal, convinced as they were that the wisest choices are most likely to emerge from the widest range of possibilities and the broadest participation in the testing of those possibilities in practice. Rather than ask if beliefs are simply right or wrong, Whitman and James each tried in divergent ways to understand the value of

differing attitudes in the conduct of everyday life. And rather than divide the world into “masses” and “intellectuals” on the European model—intellectuals, that is, *against* the masses—they tried to be intellectuals of and for the ordinary citizen. With all the discord and dissonance of American life, they could value ordinary lives in this way only by regarding each small world as a facet of the larger one.<sup>24</sup>

Pragmatism’s many detractors may not share this faith in the ordinary citizen. In the abstract, they might agree that all people ought to participate as equals in the making of social life. But even those who might assent in the abstract—our leftist intellectuals—tend to regard the average citizen as unprepared to assume full control owing to the persistence of “false consciousness.” False consciousness is a term of Marxist provenance that is used to explain why people fail to rise up against oppression in the absence of force. Although slaves in both the ancient and the early modern worlds tried to escape to freedom, industrial workers in the United States have typically refused to overthrow the class of owners who employ them. Since Marxist doctrine holds that every class will automatically pursue its material interests, and since ownership is apparently advantageous to the workers, their failure to rebel must reflect a conceptual confusion—not a conscious confusion but an unconscious one, perpetuated by a duplicitous cultural system. This reasoning leads to the rather un-Marxist conclusion that ordinary citizens, including those who belong to the working class, must first undergo an ideological reformation, a reprogramming, so to speak, before they can act to their own real advantage.

The unmasking of false consciousness has proven enormously fruitful for the humanities in recent years, and humanists have increasingly felt called upon to do the work of “ideology critique.” Good intentions notwithstanding, this sense of mission justifies a qualitative distinction between an enlightened minority and a vast, semiconscious majority, largely white, largely middle- or working-class. But even those who belong to oppressed or excluded enclaves within the larger society—women, African Americans, Native Americans, and so on—are viewed by some Marxist scholars as trapped inside false consciousness. Under these conditions the academic intellectual is obliged to play a dual role, laying siege to the dominant culture while assisting in the birth of new and oppositional values. The intellectual must work on behalf of the oppressed, while also exploring the ways in which the dominant culture “represents” or depicts the oppressed within society generally. By deconstructing the representations that the dominant class has created, academic intellectuals will usher in a new society. But I wonder if these intellectuals can actually play such a role, acting as stand-ins for the oppressed. How well, for example, does a white American feminist historian understand the day-to-day realities of a black Caribbean emigrée woman who works as a motel maid in Piscataway, New Jersey? Even if the feminist historian happens to know quite a bit about the lives of such people, no one can speak for the maid as well as the maid can speak for herself. And there is something quite condescending, too, in assuming that the maid’s mental condition has prevented her from being heard. It seems far more likely that the maid has not been heard for other reasons, perhaps because of popular indifference but also because our society lacks the appropriate mechanisms. The problem, in other words, is not that the maid has been deceived but that she lacks the

power to act in ways that would transform her situation. Many pragmatists would say that people are held down by the absence of real-world alternatives rather than by their conditioning. Academics who act as ambassadors of the oppressed are no substitute for enduring arrangements that might enable the oppressed to explain themselves and pursue their own interests as they wish.

The role of the critical intellectual is problematic for another, even more important reason: critique itself may be just an illusion. After all, when we change our ideas, what have we really changed except for our ideas? Yesterday I may have been an existentialist and tomorrow I may switch my allegiance to the Marxist philosopher Althusser, but what will have really changed if I still get up at six o'clock, arrive at work by nine, put in my eight hours five days a week, and pick up a paycheck twice a month? Even many defenders of the pragmatist legacy fail to understand this crucial objection. The point of thinking is not just to change ideas but to change our actual lives. And in this process of change, ideas may play a minimal role. As Emerson was first to recognize, activity has a wisdom of its own, since activity reveals opportunities impossible to foresee by relying on existing knowledge. This is why when we try to act self-consciously, or with a specific outcome in mind, the result is so often halting and unsuccessful. But when we act in a way that diminishes self-consciousness and the will to control events, our activity takes on an autonomous life and a greater, implicit order can emerge.

Emerson's word for this implicit order was "oversoul," a subject that our latter-day pragmatists have kept carefully offstage as an embarrassment akin to William James's fascination with the occult. "Man," Emerson wrote, "is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence."<sup>25</sup> Emerson's discussion of the oversoul remained tentative and imprecise, and today it may appear to resemble the Freudian unconscious, but Emerson would probably object to the view that we can bring the unconscious to consciousness simply by looking inside our minds or remembering details from the past—as would, I suspect, William James. During the last years of his career, after the pioneering work in psychology, James concluded that the unconscious—or, as he called it, the subconscious—is not inside the mind at all, but out there in the world. For James, the subconscious *is* the world, or rather, all aspects of the world that exceed our immediate attention and our cultural conditioning:

My present field of consciousness is a centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into a subconscious more. . . . What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of all the time is the centre; but our *full* self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and can hardly begin to analyze.<sup>26</sup>

Although self and world seem quite sharply distinct, their distinctness is an "optical" illusion produced by consciousness: there can be no self except as part of this world right here and now. Even memories exist only in the present moment as approximate reconstructions of what happened in the past. From these conclusions it



follows that the Freudian practice of analysis, so important to the postmodern academy, cannot achieve what its advocates believe. For one thing, both consciousness and the “unconscious” occupy a perpetually shifting terrain, and what was conscious a moment ago can recede once again into unconsciousness. When we try to bring the subconscious into consciousness, we cannot really go deeper into the mind, since there is nothing to the mind except our awareness of this moment. All we can do is turn our attention to another moment, another disclosure of the world. Introspection, therefore, is a myth. But in this case, what on earth is thinking for? James replies that the purpose of thinking is to deal pragmatically with the next moment. As he puts it, the “concepts we talk with are made for purposes of *practice* and not for purposes of insight.”<sup>27</sup>

If James is correct, then the humanities are in trouble. When humanists claim to set aside crude, worldly, practical concerns for the sake of purely “philosophical” inquiry, they actually fall prey to the optical illusion of a pure thinker somehow separate from the world. But this is just what the humanities have done for the last two decades, dominated as most of our disciplines have been by what is called “French theory.” The rise of theory is a complex development that I address in Part II, but it might be described unsympathetically as prepackaged analytical systems devised by a handful of European luminaries: Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, Habermas, and possibly the latecomer Žižek. I will grant that reflection on our activities is inescapable and necessary, but the term “theory” in the academy today has a more restricted connotation, describing philosophic systems quite divorced from any real-world tasks, except those so grand as to exceed any possibility of realization. And as a pragmatist, I cannot take at face value theory’s claim to the status of pure reflection. Like all thinking, it must serve some practical aim—and that aim, or one of its aims at any rate, is to establish as an unquestioned elite the small circle of those who create and use theory.

The exclusionary character of theory, though obvious to nonacademics, is a great, undiscussable secret within the university. While the defenders of theory represent it as “insurgent” and “liberatory,” a weapon of the oppressed, it is in fact ideally suited to the life of the hyperspecialist who relies on technical expertise inaccessible to the ordinary citizen. That theory is essentially technical, even mechanical, in character only its defenders will deny. But once a theory has been learned, it lends itself to almost every application with only a few slight adjustments. Michel Foucault can be used, for example, to explain a poet’s life and work, or the history of public education, or the caste system of India, or the sexual practices of the British middle class. Because it seems to explain so much so thoroughly, theory can be heady stuff, and perhaps for this reason few of its advocates have come to grips with its tautological character. Whatever its defects, however, theory has admirably served humanists eager to acquire a form of knowledge closely comparable to the knowledge made by the sciences, and in this spirit theory has marketed itself as a science of “signs” and “signifying practices,” in other words, of language and culture.

But theory is on the wane, largely because the once exciting research it inspired has progressively taken on the character of an empty ritual, much as

communism did in the Soviet Bloc just prior to its collapse. Some disciplines have embraced theory more guardedly than others—philosophy and history in particular—but English departments now find themselves overtaken by profound malaise. The top of the profession has begun to shift toward aesthetics or literary history with fewer Gallic flourishes, while the bottom has turned for comfort to the practice of social critique and the dissemination of “critical consciousness” through the conduit of the classroom. Like theory, the movement gathering around critical consciousness inspires a missionary zeal among its believers, but it also reinstates a familiar division between intellectuals and the masses—that is, those few who have critical consciousness and the many who lack it. Quite apart from the impossibility of defining critical consciousness with precision, or of proving its reality by empirical means, the idea has other limitations as well. Although its defenders often celebrate change, especially change of a revolutionary kind, critique as a practice is quite conservative. Instead of devising real alternatives, a much harder undertaking than critique, the practitioners of critical consciousness have built their careers on scathing treatments of Disney World or *The Simpsons*.

Relevant and trendy as such critiques may seem, they actually reflect the most fundamental problem of the humanities in our time—their profound social isolation. A century ago, for example, works of history enjoyed enormous readerships, sometimes surpassing those of popular novelists. By contrast, most historians today write only for other historians in a language inhospitable to nonspecialists.<sup>28</sup> But this abandonment of the general reader follows from an isolation of another kind. The truth is that people trained in the humanities are often ill prepared to write with any genuine knowledge about science, sexuality, the film industry, urban life, or other pressing current issues. One example is especially telling. Several years ago, a leading journal in a subfield of English known as cultural studies published an article by an eminent scientist who denied that the sciences describe reality.<sup>29</sup> What the sciences describe, the author suggested, is at bottom arbitrary, no less socially and historically constructed than, say, our table manners or sartorial preferences. On these terms, even science cannot operate outside the reach of critique—in other words, outside the reach of English professors. The only problem, it turned out, was that the article, which had gone to press unread by any competent reviewer, was a brilliant parody of cultural studies intended to embarrass the journal and its cutting-edge editorial board. No direct attack, however well-reasoned, could have done half so much to discredit the pretensions of English as the would-be disciplinarian of other disciplines, or the notion that a critic can read whole cultures just as easily as reading a novel or a poem. Sadly, the journal’s many supporters have remained undeterred, and the broader implications of the incident remain largely unexplored.

To my knowledge, the other side in this dispute—that is, the scientists—have never argued that their practices are sacrosanct, but they have asked for a degree of informed consideration that current training in an English department, or in most of the humanities disciplines, usually fails to provide. In English, undergraduate education is largely shaped by the imperatives of graduate training, while graduate training is largely shaped by the imperatives of the tenured professor’s working life at a major research institution. As individual competitors, professors at these institu-

tions build their reputations by publishing articles and books that other professors read, review, and cite, while departments distinguish themselves in national rankings by attracting eminent faculty and by producing numerous candidates for professorial jobs. The system is completely closed, in other words, and humanists find themselves caught in a bizarre twilight world, knowing too much on the one hand and too little on the other—too much about “cultural diasporas” and “symbolic economies” and too little about the actual lives of international migrants and the real links between the media and the corporate milieu. In a certain sense, humanist inquiry is all dressed up with nowhere to go. Since most of its discourses are quite narrowly addressed to other humanists, and not even to humanists in general but primarily to other specialists, the whole question of pertinence tends to remain unspoken—and unspeakable. To my knowledge, no department of English now measures its success according to its impact on the surrounding community, or by assessing the circulation of its written output in some larger public sphere. The results would be too depressing.

The problem, however, goes beyond inadequate training, deeply rooted as the humanities are in the lofty ideal of “the intellectual,” which I regard as a fixture of a heritage now rapidly receding. At the time of Voltaire or Dr. Johnson, perhaps the West’s archetypal modern intellectuals, the best that people could hope for was a clubby *republic* of letters—as opposed to a genuine *democracy*—guided by the mere handfuls of men who could then count as educated. But things have changed, and the role of the intellectual, the uniquely educated and cognizant man, is inescapably on the decline, though not for the reasons many people think. The truth is that knowledge of all sorts has become vastly more available than at any other moment in history. More books get printed and more readers read them. Add to this the information that circulates through television, movies, and the Internet, and the growing number of people who contribute to the making of even the most specialized knowledge, and Dr. Johnson’s world begins to look like ancient history.

Understandably, this development has caused some trepidation in the traditional humanities fields. One way to explain the rise of theory, for instance, is to see it as our latest bid to recover the authority blown away by the explosion of knowledge in the modern world. The point I’d like to make here, however, is that our nostalgia for the intellectual’s leadership role has prevented us from seeing what should be plain—that all this change might be to the good. The problem is that we still think of knowledge in eighteenth-century terms. We still think of it, in other words, as a scarce commodity that must be carefully sifted and weighed before it enters into general circulation. The truth is that the making of knowledge today far outstrips the mechanisms of critical assessment and restraint—not only in sheer volume but in the pace of production. By the time our critics of “popular culture” have completed their harsh assessments of *Titanic* or *Saving Private Ryan*, those films will be old news, and few of our students five years from now will probably have seen them. Even if academic critics were able to speak to and for a society as diverse as ours, they cannot stop the culture machine or slow it down. If anything, criticism has simply become the most discerning type of consumption, a snobbery disguised as principled resistance.

Once we stop conceiving of knowledge as a scarce commodity on the model of ages past, a commodity given value by its scarcity, and we begin to think about it as superabundant, then we can see that no particular knowledge has any value at all. What matters in our society is the ability to produce more knowledge of use to more people, or to circulate existing knowledge in unprecedented ways. Social power comes not from what we know but from what we can do with what we know, from the capacity to act creatively. This is why observers like Robert Bellah are spectacularly off target when they decry the corporatization of the university. In America, corporate money has always paid for higher learning, and if Duke and Stanford aren't good enough examples, then an afternoon's research on the better public universities might clinch the argument. No, the difference is not that universities have suddenly gone corporate, but that they are shifting from being repositories of established knowledge, collected for the purposes of teaching and cultural normalization, to becoming sites of knowledge production and dispersal. What has changed, in other words, is the university's structural relation to society as a whole. At one time, the university imagined itself as a place apart from society. More and more it has come to occupy a central position: once a dusty archive, it has become instead a communications hub. But where does that leave us in the humanities, when the safeguarding of the archive has always been our principal task? While I cannot foresee a prosperous future for all of our current disciplines, I am convinced that the humanities as a whole will have bright prospects if they are prepared to reinvent themselves. But how?

Humanists must learn to think of their fellow citizens as genuine collaborators, not as students to be lectured at, heathens to be converted, or philistines to be shunned. What I mean is not simply that our embrace of criticism has reinforced our claim to a privileged vantage point, but also that we have to stop assuming that others will see our isolation as a reason to respect us. In particular, we need to stop relying on the conception of ourselves as professionals enjoying a monopoly. While it is true that for much of this century professions like medicine had a virtual lock on their clientele, that situation has begun to change. From outside the professions, public resentment has occasioned a significant degree of restiveness; on the inside, the rapid growth of specialized inquiry has inadvertently produced what the sociologist Anthony Giddens calls an "indefinite" pluralism of expertise.<sup>30</sup> A person with cancer can go to an oncologist, a naturopath, or a specialist in Chinese medicine; a person with emotional problems can consult a Freudian psychiatrist, a Jungian psychoanalyst, a clinical psychologist, a neurologist, a priest, a rabbi, or a faith healer. As for the humanities, they have never enjoyed the dominance that once made medicine the envy of the other professions, and in contrast to lawyers as well as physicians, scholars working in philosophy, history, and literary studies have seldom been able to sell services directly to their clients. Those who disagree can put my argument to the test with ads in the Yellow Pages that read "Philosopher for Hire" or "Public Literary Critic." Even with low hourly rates and free consultations, the only calls the freelance humanist is likely to get will be from Oklahoma banks hawking low-interest credit cards. Instead of selling services directly to clients, fields like philosophy and English depend for their survival on the university's bureaucra-

tic structure and prestige, and without these artificial protections, they would largely disappear. Even with them, they may disappear. But at the same time, many universities are overwhelmed by the demand for educated and articulate generalists. At the university where I teach, the English department cannot begin to meet the current demand for people with appropriate preparation in writing for the sciences and the professions. Former teachers in the writing program I direct now work as editors and researchers at salaries comparable to those of eagerly courted new assistant professors. And I suspect there may be a huge untapped market for research and writing services that the university itself might sell.

The humanities must become “service providers” in a free-market climate. I recognize, of course, that in the culture of the humanities, to speak of selling information or skills is almost the same as saying that we should sell our souls, or our children. We might recollect, however, that this circumspection owes much more to Matthew Arnold than it does to Karl Marx. It was Arnold, after all, who first defined the critical intellectual as the person who does no worldly work, and who, by eschewing all practical engagement and know how, can think “above the fray,” so to speak.<sup>31</sup> In effect, Arnold establishes a ruinous division of labor. To the sciences, to business, and to government he cedes all worldly action, while securing for the humanities an austere contemplative role. Men of the world are left to clash on the darkling plain like the ignorant armies in the poem “Dover Beach,” while the humanists pass judgment retrospectively from on high. In the early decades of the twentieth century, this division of cultural labor seemed ideal for granting humanities departments a place at the table of leadership, but what do humanists concretely know? And what real-world venues are there for the knowledge that we actually have? Our problem is precisely that the view from above is too blurry and too dark, and that no one below can hear us, or could understand us if they did. We need to step down.

Stepping down, however, may not be so bad. Look at all the work that might get done if we are willing to involve ourselves in an unpretentious way with central problems of our time—globalization, the environmental crisis, the growing split between the haves and have-nots, the erosion of well-defined cultures, the disappearance of the transcendent. The issue here is not simply the old chestnut of relevance—bringing Shakespeare up to date by mixing *Romeo and Juliet* with *Boyz n the Hood*. We need a fundamental change of direction. Painful as it may be to admit it, the present does not wait to be measured by the past; instead, the value of the past—its only value, I would say—is its helpfulness to us right now.

If we can make a real contribution to people’s lives today, they may even start to listen to us once again. The reason that political scientists and economists—and some historians as well—turn up as talking heads on the evening news is primarily that their fields have always served as conduits for people who go on to take jobs with the State Department and other branches of government or, just as often, with business; in fact, some of the best scholars in these fields circulate in and of the academy throughout their careers. Although we should continue to build on our past achievements, I suspect that our best future will be found in a different sort of specialization than we have so far cultivated. The specialization of the humanities

today is disciplinary in nature: that is, historians cover only the subject of history, critics cover only literary texts, art historians cover only art, and the subjects themselves get organized internally in the most predictable ways, by historical periods and geography. But the humanities might trade specialization by discipline for specialization by areas of real-world activity. We might someday see, for example, fields such as “medical humanities,” “legal humanities,” “economic humanities,” “media humanities,” each linked to professional or preprofessional programs. People working in these disciplines might be historians, philosophers, and critics all at once. In fact, they would need to combine our traditionally separated disciplines; they would also need to be well versed in medicine or law or economics. Sweeping as such a proposal may sound, we already have many humanists of this kind, although we seldom think of them as humanists. The paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould would belong on the list, as would the physicist Carl Sagan, and the ecologists Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold. To these names I might add two biologists, Anne and Paul Ehrlich, authors of *The Population Bomb*; a psychiatrist, Robert Coles, who wrote the multivolume *Children of Crisis*; a psychologist, Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*; the political scientist Benjamin Barber and the management theorist Peter Drucker, whose books are too numerous to be named here. I would also add the names of writers working outside the academy: Bill McKibben, author of *The Death of Nature*, Thomas Moore, who wrote *The Care of the Soul*, and Susan Faludi for her feminist opus *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*.

To reimagine the humanities along these lines would mean understanding them, not as particular subjects, but as the human dimension of all knowledge. When we begin, for example, to explore the human dimension of medicine, as opposed to more restrictively scientific concerns, we enter into the realm of what I am calling “medical humanities.” In that context, we might ask questions about the history of medical practice and institutions; about historical and cross-cultural perceptions of illness, including those represented in literary texts. And we might ask about the experiences of illness and health as people actually live through them. Far from diminishing the humanities, a reform of this kind would open vast new horizons of research to those appropriately trained. At the same time, it would greatly broaden the exposure of ordinary citizens to the legacy of the older humanities as well as to the new scholarship. Where I now teach, the humanities reach in a significant way (that is, in more than two courses on the way to the B.A. or B.S. degree) fewer than 20 percent of undergraduates, and humanities majors account for fewer than 15 percent. At many universities, the figures for majors are even more dismal—sometimes as low as 5 percent. But reforms of the sort I am proposing would bring the humanities to students who now miss or quite intentionally evade them because our disciplines, in their splendid isolation, can often seem irrelevant and needlessly arcane. And if the humanities would benefit, so too would colleges of engineering, schools of medicine, and M.B.A. programs.

As long as we imagine the humanities as branches of a “human science” corresponding to the natural sciences, we overlook what makes the humanities crucially different. We should not dismiss a remark once made by William James, echoing Plato—that all knowledge begins and ends in wonder.<sup>32</sup> For many human-

ists today, the experience of wonder is certainly important, but only as a personal consequence of an impersonal enterprise. Yet wonder is never simply a happy accident; it is the motive force behind the making of knowledge itself, and without it, knowledge soon becomes dead and deadening. The distinctive purpose of the humanities is to make wonder possible by insisting, over and over again, on both the openness of our experience and the coherence of the world we encounter through it. The pedant, the dogmatic thinker, is the person who confines himself to knowledge in a fixed and finished form, while carefully averting his eyes from the uncertain, which encircles us everywhere. Only after we have turned from the safety of our systems, paradigms, and formulas, does the process of questioning take on new life, which we may feel to be the life of the world itself. I will grant that the humanities are not the only area of knowledge to inspire and cultivate wonder, but the humanities make wonder possible in ways that may even surpass scientific inquiry, astonishing as science has become. Although science is far more complex an activity than even scholars of science can fully explain, it seems fair to say that it produces its knowledge about the world by stepping away from that world, so to speak, by reducing to small parts the lived world in all its experiential wholeness and immediacy. We might say that the knowledge of science is deep but not broad: even the dizzying heights of cosmology look down on only one narrow prospect, beyond which lies the heterogeneous world we encounter in our everyday lives. Increasingly, what science now addresses lies beyond this world altogether, in the microverse of quantum mechanics and the macroverse of black holes. In my opinion, the breakthroughs of science are the greatest achievements in the twentieth century, but in order for those achievements to acquire human meaning—that is, meaning and “weight” in the realm of values and behavior—the humanities must play a mediating role by “translating” the discoveries of science back into the contexts of ordinary life and language. For this reason, I count much of popular science writing today among the best work getting done in the humanities, and I deeply regret as ignorant, mean, and self-serving much of what passes in the academic humanities for the critique of science.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, the current war between the sciences and humanities will end either with the ruin of science, hardly to be expected but still possible, or the complete discrediting of the humanities, which seems more probable all the time. A third alternative is a new partnership between them.

For some time now, the humanities have tried to rival of the sciences by imitating their methods, but I believe that this strategy has failed. As I argue in the final chapters of Part II, future education in the humanities needs to include a great deal of actual science, but at the same time, the humanities must rediscover their much-neglected roots in the arts—not in the arts as the subject of either critical study or cultured consumption, but as the actual practice of art making. I believe that the purpose of the humanities is to connect specialized knowledge with the everyday life-world—the world we share as people, not as doctors or physicists or carpenters or sales representatives, and not as women or men or blacks or whites. And if this is true, then the arts have to play an indispensable role, since the arts dramatize the process of fashioning connections among our various perspectives, disciplines, and credos. The arts enact in a highly ritualized way an element of all

human culture at its best: the movement out of the self and into the world, and out of the world and back into the self again.

To many people in the humanities, this proposal might actually sound far more radical and threatening than the argument that humanists need to know more science. A great secret of the academic humanities has been their quiet but consistent exclusion of the arts as an activity, as a practice. Most universities keep the less-prestigious performing arts and studio arts at some distance from the more revered and often better paid humanities. Art historians seldom have any contact with professors of sculpture or printmaking, and in English departments, critics and scholars have had a long history of uneasy relations with contemporary novelists and poets. This divorce between the study of art and the making of art is not at all an accident but reflects the way in which the humanities established themselves as distinctive professions. For one thing, the arts bear too close a resemblance to the applied disciplines, which our predecessors brushed aside as *déclassé*. Since its inception, the modern university has privileged the “cultural” over the “practical,” and theoretical knowledge over applied knowledge. While this prejudice has begun to erode, the rise of English, to take just one example, virtually demanded the exclusion or quarantine of “creative writing.” Writers had to be put on a pedestal so high that ordinary folk would be induced give up on the thought that they themselves could be writers, or even that they could make sense of the poem or book by themselves. Of course, other, more pedestrian factors played a part as well. Right now, for example, the great majority of our genuinely excellent novelists, and there are quite a few in America today, seldom get taught at universities. And, in fact, if English departments tried to keep up with the pace of artistic production, they would need to double in size or else curtail more than a few courses on historically important writers. The whole system, however, is designed to perpetuate a *manageable* body of canonical work, and one stable enough to ensure the survival of the existing divisions of scholarship in English. No matter how many volumes have been written on similar topics in years past, graduate students who complete dissertations on Shelley have a far better chance of getting a job than those who write on Peter Matthiessen or Jane Smiley. Other disciplines, such as biology, have been forced by the growth of new knowledge to reconstruct themselves almost from scratch, but in English, we may never see any comparable change undertaken voluntarily from within our own departments. English pays a price, however, for this resistance to change. Anyone who bothers to research the titles of recently granted dissertations in the field will probably agree that most of them, with some slight accretions of new scholarship, could have been published half a century ago.

I am not arguing that we should throw out the great books or terminate all historically oriented scholarship, but I believe that the humanities as a whole devote far too many resources to research that has a negligible impact on the real life of our society. If we support disciplines like English because we value the arts, then perhaps we should do more to support the arts directly. When one stops to think about it, novelists might prove to be no less capable than historically trained scholar-critics in the teaching of, say, “The English Novel to 1900.” But I would prefer that our doctors, engineers, and web masters had the experience of actually *writing* fiction or



*making* linocuts or *taking* photographs, rather than enrolling in an isolated survey course for nonmajors on the grounds that these courses give the student a little culture, or worse, that they are needed in order to rectify the student's political outlook: in my view, nothing could do a greater injustice to the whole tradition of the arts, no matter how well taught such courses might be. At the same time, courses in creative writing or painting or dance might actually stimulate interest in historically oriented study. Indeed, such a result would follow almost inevitably if, as we claim when it suits us, historical scholarship complements and enriches artistic practice.

I recognize, however, that the arts themselves are in trouble, though slightly differently from the humanities. I will certainly not be the first person to observe that art making in America has been captured by an elaborate system that involves elite patrons, exclusionary museums and media outlets, and critical gurus who have, at times, striven mightily to normalize tastes and control the direction of the arts from above. All of these vectors came together most smoothly and effectively with the rise abstract expressionism, a movement guided by the criticism of theorists like Clement Greenberg. During this period, universities and museums waged a kind of *jihad* on all forms of representational art, which became, absurdly, a straw man standing in for middle-class conformity.<sup>34</sup> Even today, when the arts have grown ungovernably diverse (a triumph for the arts, in my view), many superb artists remain outside the circle of public attention—and financial viability—simply because they fail to do what certain critics sanction. It is my hope, however, that a greatly broadened level of participation might help to save the arts from their sometimes overpossessive guardians.

And perhaps such a change would do something as well to diminish the power of possessiveness in general. Could it be that our infatuation with “theory,” no less than our obsession with computers and cars, is an autistic response to a failure of imagination? Perhaps we academics are content to criticize consumer culture ad infinitum precisely because we can imagine no alternatives that have not already turned out badly. And most of the alternatives have turned out very badly indeed. However much humanists may detest the market system, who can forget what preceded its triumph? Facing the “iron cage of modernity,” the sociologist Max Weber toyed with a return to charismatic leadership, but Hitler's answer to that call has (I hope) decisively ended a chapter in the history of our illusions.<sup>35</sup> And the same might be said of the great communitarian experiments of our century: Lenin's Soviet Union, Mao's People's Republic, the North Korea of Kim Il Sung, the Kampuchea of Pol Pot. Except for the dream of the market, the benign promise of endless plenty, all our dreams have taken us into dark nights far worse than the fantasies of Bruegel and Bosch. If the triumph of theory signals anything, it signals the exhaustion of alternatives, a failure of the capacity to dream anything truly new.

This is precisely why the otherworldliness of our disciplines now stands us in such poor stead. We look longingly back to Socrates, our first Critic, without acknowledging that he created nothing, accomplished nothing; only at the end of his life did Socrates have a true vision, commanding him to make music. Had Socrates lived and had he learned to embrace the revelations of his dreams, we today might