

## The “Reflexive Humanities”

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A recent article in *The New York Review of Books* about affluence in America offered sobering news for today’s college students and the parents funding their education. Its assessment of the value of higher education featured two tables, one documenting skyrocketing tuitions over the last thirty years and another estimating what college degrees are worth in terms of yearly income (Hacker 2007, 32, 33). The news does not look good, and in particular for the humanities. So it is no surprise that rising costs of higher education have pressed the humanities into an increasingly defensive posture and prompted concerns about their ability to earn their keep among neighboring disciplines with more immediately practical applications to advertise. Such trends bespeak a cultural preoccupation with the economic bottom line and the growing perception of education as a saleable commodity whose investors have every right to expect a material return. When value is conceived in purely financial terms, the humanities are destined to fare rather poorly. It is in this defensive climate that Stanley Fish in his recent *New York Times* piece interjects his deliberately provocative claim: “To the question ‘of what use are the humanities?’, the only honest answer is none whatsoever.”

Fish’s small concession of the intrinsic pleasures the humanities bring to those who practice them is a slim peg on which to hang an entire tradition of intellectual inquiry and at the same time appears suspiciously cozy with the pressures of the very market forces from which he seeks to protect humanities departments. Measuring the value of the humanities solely in terms of the pleasure they yield those who study them can prove a limiting proposition that, as Mark Edmundson warns, educators in the classroom have been inclined to take all too literally (Edmundson 1997). The culture of consumption has

penetrated the American university, turning instruction into a service industry intent on satisfying the student as savvy customer. Fish tellingly employs commercial language when he argues in a follow-up column that justification for humanistic study “requires more than evidence that a consumer can get a desirable commodity in your shop, too; it requires a demonstration that you have the exclusive franchise” (Fish 2008). Rather than challenging the students, the classroom as “shop” becomes an extension of the marketplace, delivering up its intellectual wares in a form designed to amuse and entertain, and comprises a deferential environment that is unwilling to risk offense.

Fish’s baiting questions about the value of the humanities opportunistically tap into internal anxieties about a crisis of identity as scholars engage in ever more defensive accounts of their disciplines’ objectives and substantive contributions.<sup>1</sup> Fears of the steady erosion of disciplinary integrity have fueled efforts to rediscover specialization and to recognize that humanistic study possesses its own particular *techné* or skill set.

The cultural turn in the humanities has led members of Fish’s and my native discipline of English studies to trespass on some unexpected terrain, from anthropology and political science to technology and ecology. Scholars in search of fresh pastures thus graze in other disciplines outside of the traditional humanities, drawn to fields that appear exotic but in which they have no real expertise. This kind of approach is, as Marjorie Perloff contends, not so much interdisciplinary as it is “*otherdisciplinary*” (Perloff 2007, 655). Perloff sounds a more pervasive concern that interdisciplinary offerings have substantially weakened the position of the humanities within the academy, compromising the disciplines’ integrity as autonomous fields. Both Fish and Perloff independently speak to growing fears about an academic climate in which literary matters appear secondary, and take on a merely instrumental value in relation to other more practically useful, and hence financially justifiable, kinds of research.

Such scholarly eclecticism, syncretizing disparate areas of knowledge, has led historian Roger Griffin, in his recent investigation of the relationship between fascism and modernism, to identify the need for “reflexive humanities” that can take stock of their own activities and

methods (Griffin 2007, 36). In disabling outsiders from determining the value of humanistic study, Fish refuses to grant its practitioners an ability to achieve sufficient analytic distance to assess their own disciplinary undertakings. And by doing so, he overlooks one of the greatest strengths of the humanities, effectively neutering the disciplines rather than shoring up their potency against the assaults of the uninitiated. In his presumption that justification “confers value on an activity from a perspective outside its performance,” Fish too hastily dismisses the possibility that humanists might provide a sustained inquiry into the value of their own endeavors. The interpretive framework Griffin proposes, at once panoramic and self-conscious, presents a necessary correction to the underexamined and hubristic practices of an earlier generation of humanism. The poststructuralist epistemology of the late twentieth century has, Fish implies, settled into the humanities like gangrene, forcing researchers “into the reaches of incomprehensible and often corrosive theory” (Fish 2008). But instead of signaling the imminent demise of the humanities, this kind of theoretically informed reflexivity offers an encouraging sign of their general health.

It is the humane sensitivity with which the humanities reflect upon their own undertaking and the neighborliness with which they reach out to other disciplines that constitute their particular, and indispensable, contribution to the academy. And perhaps it is by opening up the questions of justification, which Fish’s deceptively transparent pronouncements seek to foreclose, that we might renew the humanities’ relevance and clarify their distinctive merits, without pressing for an autonomy that spurns the judgments of outsiders.

When Fish concludes that the humanities “don’t do anything, if by ‘do’ is meant bring about effects in the world,” he echoes W.H. Auden who, in an elegy for W.B. Yeats, wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen” (Auden 1977, 241–243). The elegy itself is a kind of exercise in literary interpretation, an evaluation of the deceased poet for posterity, which might restore some wanted subtlety to Fish’s polarized extremes and offer a different assessment of humanistic study. “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” (February 1939) provides a reflection on the poetry of statement, on art as manifesto or primer for action. If the poem’s central axiom that poetry makes nothing happen smacks of the slogan,

Auden thwarts such interpretive reduction, and when read in relation to its various contexts—stanzaic, literary-biographical, historical—the line gathers disparate and even contrary meanings. Auden’s elegy meditates on the legacy of the poet to a world in which what Virginia Woolf called the infernal bray of the dictator’s megaphone threatened to drown out the whispered revelations of the poet. His ambivalent tribute places Yeats at the heart of a modernist debate in the interwar period over the degree to which art should speak directly to the political and social concerns of the moment and the extent to which the poet was morally obligated to intervene in political reality, whether broadcasting propaganda or driving an ambulance in Civil War Spain.

Auden’s public meditation on Yeats’s poetic legacy took place at a pivotal moment in his own career. The elegy was composed months before the outbreak of the Second World War and shortly after he had emigrated to the United States, a culture he hoped would foster an unconstrained voice.<sup>2</sup> Written between Auden’s expression of political zeal in “Spain” (1937) and his renunciation of partisan allegiances during the war, the poem presents two opposed conceptions of the dead poet as maker (from *poiein*, to make): that of the mystical visionary aloof in the Tower on Lady Gregory’s estate and that of the revolutionary activist whose verse turns in the gyres of epochal history. The elegy’s middle portion was a later addition, forming a bridge between the first section’s sober assessment of Yeats’ impact on the world and the third section’s celebration of the power of verse to transcend the person who wrote it and the immediate political circumstances that occasioned it. In the middle section Auden addresses Yeats directly in a tone that is chummily familiar—“You were silly like us”—casually chiding him for the more egregious aspects of his political views, the eugenical and stridently nationalistic (even fascistic) strands of this thinking. The words of the dead man appear to have left the world fundamentally unchanged, more altered by it than altering of it, “modified in the guts of the living.” In the wake of his death, as the living poet can attest,

Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,  
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its saying where executives  
Would never want to tamper; it flows south

From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
 A way of happening, a mouth.

Approximating the “memorable speech” that Auden considered the best definition of poetry, the aphoristic statement that poetry makes *nothing* happen subverts the imperative claims of Yeats’ revolutionary verse.<sup>3</sup> Poetry ensures its survival by resisting the tampering of “executives” who remain riveted to the bottom line and the calculation of measurable profits and losses.

Auden carries out his argument with Yeats about the political potency of their art in the grammar of his poem. Poetic making, as the verbs in the middle portion suggest, exists in the intransitive mode, acting without an immediate object or practical agenda: it “survives / In the valley of its saying” and “flows south.” One way of understanding the subtle qualifications of Auden’s oblique imagery is to see the passage as enacting a distinction between authorship and writing, which allows us to envision a way of happening that is not torn between the binary opposition of what we might describe as Fish’s and Yeats’ attitudes towards humanism. Distinguishing between two modes of writing, Roland Barthes argues that, in the case of the author, “*to write* is an intransitive verb,” whereas the writer, by contrast, is a “‘transitive’ man”: “he posits a goal (to give evidence, to explain, to instruct), of which language is merely a means; for him language supports a *praxis*, it does not constitute one” (Barthes 1988, 187, 189). The central section of the poem accordingly shows the author in Auden contending against the writer in Yeats. Auden jettisons the “transitive” properties of Yeats’ poetry in order to inaugurate an “intransitive” poetry. But to deny that poetry has a material impact upon the “weather,” the “sufferings” of the poor, or the “roaring” of brokers “on the floor of the Bourse” is not to say it is of no use. If “poetry makes nothing happen,” in the sense of compelling action in the outside world, it nevertheless provides a “way of happening.” Auden’s organic metaphor implies a different scale of time, where poetry is a river that alters the landscape, as it might transform the psychic geography of readers, gradually and undramatically, but with the most profound consequences.

Again, attentive reading, as Auden demonstrates in his confrontation with his predecessor, possesses its own ethical dimension. Once he has purged Yeats “himself,” or at least his exaggerated persona, from the verse that survives him, Auden turns in the final section to argue the opposite case—that poetry is a force that exceeds the social causes of the moment, at once meta-political and suprahistorical. In its celebration of a language that can transcend the man and pardon “his views,” poetry regains a transitive force that can move an object, without necessarily compelling its object into passivity: the “unconstraining voice” of the poet can “persuade us to rejoice,” “Let the healing fountain start,” and “Teach the free man how to praise.” This final section of the poem mingles the two perspectives of poetry making nothing happen and poetry affecting reality more deeply than simpler forms of action. Auden exhorts poetry itself to “persuade,” “Let...start,” and “Teach,” without, for example, telling us what to “praise” or “rejoice” in. Poetry thus gives us the means to praise, “a way of happening,” without commanding a specific outcome. In fact, poetry, and by extension the humanities, warn against too readily reducing the range of human choice to an expedient program for action. If Auden ultimately is not prepared to say of poetry what Fish says of the humanities—that they do not “bring about effects in the world”—he nonetheless renounces the extravagant claims of many of his fellow modernists that poetry could remake the world in its own perfected image, a form of supreme arrogance in which the artist becomes indistinguishable from the authoritarian.

“In Memory of W. B. Yeats” displays the reflexivity that is the special contribution of the humanities, as the poem juxtaposes two competing theories of the poet’s power: whether art is immune or directly answerable to social causes; what I have called, following Barthes, the “intransitive” and “transitive” properties of art. If the latter theory appears to gain the upper hand in the end, it does so only after Auden has expressed his reservations by letting the other argument have its say. The poem carries greater force for leaving the argument in play, giving voice to both possibilities without seeking forcibly to resolve them. In the polarized climate of the academy, shaped by the competitive forces of consumer capitalism, Auden helpfully reminds us of the softer shades of value that exist between the lofty peaks of our culture’s

spiritual salvation and the obscure depths of institutional budgets. As a renewed expression of the vitality of the humanities, Auden's poem also preserves a place for rhetorical, ethical, and political engagement, which Fish would banish from the university. In a *New York Times* column last September, for example, Fish rebuked Columbia University President Lee Bollinger for attacking Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on political grounds during the Iranian president's visit to the campus. Arguing that Bollinger's public challenge constituted an unwarranted provocation, where both university president and classroom instructor ought to be bound by "academic protocols" of political and ideological neutrality, Fish expressed his convictions that the goal of the liberal arts is to impart analytic skills devoid of any unseemly taint of partisanship and that the university should not "stand anywhere on the vexed issues of the day" (Fish 2007). It makes a great deal of sense to challenge the value of the humanities, as Fish does; but even his reductive attitude is one that was, ironically, fostered in the self-conscious environment of humanistic study. Auden's poem shows that, even when history presses with most alarming circumstances on the moment of writing, cynicism and polarization need not constitute our response.

## Notes

1. Terry Eagleton offers a witty critique of Fish's sophistical argumentative tactics in "The Estate Agent," *London Review of Books*, March 2, 2000, reprinted in Eagleton (2003, 171–179).
2. For an illuminating reading of the poem and the personal and social circumstances from which it emerged, see Mendelson (1999, 3–17).
3. From Auden's Introduction to the anthology *The Poet's Tongue* (1935), in Auden (1996, 105).

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