

◆ Afterword

The Trap of Relevance

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An esteemed colleague once paid me the head-scratching compliment that my work engaged pressing contemporary issues while “avoiding the trap of relevance.” In what way, I thought, was it a trap for one’s work to be relevant? And, for that matter, relevant to what?

From my colleague’s perspective, relevance could be a trap insofar as the study of literature, especially literature of the past, should be focused on that literature itself, and not on the possible relevance it may have for contemporary concerns. This is a reasonable worry, one that becomes all the more palpable in the nadir of an economic crisis that predictably, even robotically, advances humanistic studies as the first sacrifice to the gods of fiscal prudence. By articulating the relevance of what we do in an attempt to stave off that sacrifice, do we humanists—and more to the point, scholars of literature and language—unwittingly sacrifice something more precious, the very essence of what we study?

As with recent and current debates both public (Martha Nussbaum and Stanley Fish) and professional (see the 2009 issue of *MLA’s Profession*), the essays in this volume confront this dilemma, albeit from the specific vantage of Spanish and Latin American literary studies. This specification is more than a passing caveat: in the literary humanities, Hispanic studies has in recent times been one of the sole growth industries, spurred by the demand in the United States for instruction in the nation’s unofficial second language.¹ As Roy Ketchum points out in his contribution to this volume, “Spanish language learning, in particular, is promoted for its instrumental value and its marketability” (170). While this demand is undoubtedly economic and instrumental in nature, the curious unintended consequences are, to a certain extent, obvious: increasing demand for language courses leads universities either to expand the graduate student corps in Spanish departments or, what is more likely, to hire more lecturers. The former directly affects the number of scholars doing advanced work in Hispanic

language and literatures; but the latter's impact is also inevitable, as a greater demand for lecturers, at least some with relevant PhDs, reverberates through a field that has seen shrinking demand in other language areas.

The result is that, rather than staying at the margin of debates concerning the relevance of our scholarly practices, Hispanists's considerations of methodological and pedagogical challenges in light of the crisis have a particular urgency. We are forced to confront the dilemmas of relevance, and hence it is worthwhile that we do so head on, as it were.

What exactly is the problem with relevance? Fish's typically acerbic and provocative version takes this form: "To the question 'of what use are the humanities?' the only honest answer is none whatsoever."² Martha Nussbaum's book *Not for Profit*³ is an anthem of opposition to this perspective, but quoting Joshua Landy's pithy response to Fish hits the nail on the head: "Is this supposed to help? Let's put it this way: if the most prominent humanists are publicly proclaiming their belief in the utter uselessness of what they do, what reason could a cash-strapped administrator possibly have for not shutting down their departments?"⁴ Landy and Nussbaum have many excellent arguments for why the humanities are not only useful but really indispensable, and some of these include questions of marketability, to use a crass term. As Landy points out, "Employers, it turns out, actually like philosophy BAs."⁵

Fish's characteristic hyperbole and contrarianism notwithstanding, it seems unlikely to me that my two friends could really be so far apart on such a vital issue. Indeed, Jonathan Mayhew's contribution to this volume brings clarity to the debate by, in a sense, rephrasing the Fishian position. As he puts it:

I am assuming that the study of the most accomplished products of the human intelligence is an inherently valuable activity that does not require justification through such appeals. Mozart might make your baby smarter, but staking the value of Mozart on the capacity of his music to stimulate infantile intelligence provokes the question of what intelligence is *for* in the first place. Why do we want our babies to be smarter, if not to be able to exercise their intelligence in meaningful ways, such as being able to listen intelligently to Mozart? Training in the humanities may or may not always foster a sort of intelligence that is directly useful for other areas of life, but it trivializes such training to justify it by appealing to an aspirational shopping list of tangential benefits.

I can only imagine that Landy and Nussbaum would have less to disagree with in such a formulation. Indeed, Landy prefaces the economic argument by saying, "Don't get me wrong, I would hate to imply that the

humanities *need* an economic reason,” indicating an implicit agreement that direct usefulness “for other areas of life” does in fact imply a trivialization of humanistic training.

The point, I think (and this is clearly what Landy is saying), is that neither position is exclusive of the other. To embrace the inherent value of literary study, as Mayhew does, it is not necessary to claim, à la Fish, that the humanities are useless. They can be both inherently valuable *and* useful for other purposes. Most skills and practices are.

In light of this tentative disarming of the trap of relevance, the contributions to this volume offer insights in two general areas: pedagogical practice and theoretical engagement. The former area concerns how we might teach texts whose origins and themes are seemingly remote to our own in such a way that students are more likely to experience those themes and times as relevant to theirs. The correlate to these examples and recommendations is the question of why one ought to do this; of how, in other words, relevance in this case might prove enriching to the intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic lives of our students. The latter area involves considerations of how texts that are or have been traditionally peripheral to an implicit literary and theoretical canon are in fact relevant in ways that contribute substantially to those theoretical discussions, and how, in particular, past texts can and ought to be read in relation to contemporary theoretical questions and political urgencies.

The latter question has been a contentious one in the history of literary scholarship, and was certainly at least in the background of my colleague’s denigration of relevance. In the context of the famous debate around the interpretation of *Don Quixote*, for instance, Anthony Close condemned what he termed “the Romantic approach” as “accommodating” the novel “to modern stereotypes and preoccupations,” and thus involving a willful ahistoricism on the part of the critic.⁶ Relevance in theoretical matters would seem to require such willful ahistoricism. And yet those contributors who delve into theoretical concerns implicitly and in some cases explicitly reject the constraints of what we could call a naïve historicism that would claim to hold all reading of past texts to a standard based on what that text could have meant to its author and audience at the time of its production. As Bradley Nelson argues in an attempt to preempt such objections as might arise to his comparison between the works of the seventeenth-century Spanish short story writer María de Zayas and the twenty first-century Swedish novelist Stieg Larsson:

I can already see eyebrows rising at what has been up to this point an untheorized comparison of a seventeenth-century female author and a twenty-first-century male author, even if the oppressive presence of sexual violence, misogynistic social institutions, and melancholic

cultural landscapes in the works of both authors practically begs for comparison. Logical objections will be raised concerning the temporal, cultural, linguistic, and sexual disjunctions of such a project; but I will maintain that foregrounding the contemporary “state of emergency”⁷ that Larsson’s novels describe with respect to financial and government corruption, institutionalized misogyny, and sexual predation in contemporary Sweden allows us to recognize more clearly the historical relevance and urgency of Zayas’s texts with respect to baroque Spain.

Nelson’s invocation of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” is apropos here, as is the attitude toward historicism that seems most suggested by the volume’s contributors. For Benjamin there can be no naïve or innocent invocation of the past. Present concerns and their “urgency” reveal the past to us; i.e., they give us the framework in which the past means anything at all to us. In turn, our interpretations of the past convey agency to our thought in the present. As Benjamin writes in a passage that David Castillo also references in his contribution to this volume:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead he grasps the constellations which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. (Benjamin 263)

Another way of putting this is to say, with David William Foster, that “all teaching is, to a great extent, proleptic,” since we retroactively project futures for texts from the vantage of a literary history posterior to those texts. The alternative, teaching in a non-proleptic style, would presuppose approaching a text in a way ignorant of its descendants, and of the very literary history that provokes our reading it today. But not only is such an approach pedagogically impossible, it is unlikely that in many of the cases of canonically influential texts such a pure level of expression ever existed in the first place. In the essay that follows that remark, Foster does not cede to the temptation to relativize all proleptic readings of his text, *Martín Fierro*, to one true historical one; rather, he makes the history of those readings the very field of his engagement, showing, for example, how standard critical assessments of such traits as the poem’s colloquiality are themselves “textual effects” dependent on the text’s own “discourse strategies.” The point is that the text itself is not innocent of the prolepsis of its subsequent interpretation, for “while *Martín Fierro* did not immediately establish a productive paradigm for Argentine writing, in

modeling what its reading (and, significantly, hearing) audience perceived as a valid colloquial register, the poem was able to establish a place for itself in the emerging national canon both because of and despite that colloquiality” (88).

To return to Nelson’s preemptive strike, reading Zayas with Larsson is not merely justified; it is also in some sense necessary for understanding the state of emergency—the collusion of state power and patriarchal violence—that animated Zayas’s storytelling, as well as Larsson’s today. Reading Zayas without an eye to those parallels, far from rendering the reading more historical, would deprive it of one of the elements most crucial to its understanding.

The collusion between state power and patriarchal violence described by Larsson and Zayas illuminates one further field of relevance; namely, the very state of emergency this volume responds to. In the opening pages of his essay, Nelson performs an analytic transposition that is exemplary of how attunement to relevance can function as a catalyst for creative thought. The point of Zayas’s and Larsson’s “gratuitous” violence in their depiction of the treatment of women, he argues, is its apparent banality in the context represented. In other words, their fiction highlights and denaturalizes a feature that both cultures, present and past, along with their political structures, naturalize; and the fundamental trope in this naturalization is one we can actively witness at the center of the world economic crisis today and in its immediate impact on liberal arts education:

Indeed, this timeless use of political rhetoric to divide the world into black and white is not just complicated but actively encouraged by the aforementioned social dynamic at play, whereby financial elites use their substantial media and organizational resources to increase the sense of social unease and instability brought on by epochal crises, redirecting it against government policy and public institutions in the interest of exacerbating the social and economic inequality that gave rise to the crisis mentality in the first place. In short, what we are looking at is a classic case of blaming the victim, in which the crisis in university education, and public education in general, is blamed on what are seen to be the unreasonable and irresponsible demands of educational laborers, such as tenure, health care, and, ultimately, collective bargaining itself (63).

While Nelson treats this relevance in mostly theoretical terms, its potential effect as a powerful enhancement to pedagogy is not hard to see. In exploring the relevance of literatures foreign in language, culture, and time, students hone their analytic faculties by becoming more attuned to how present configurations impact their lives, and they do so via an analogical circuit that illuminates the foreign text, as well.

This practical benefit for students is the theme of David Castillo's intervention, in which he outlines and then illustrates how literary classics like *Don Quixote* can be "effectively (and productively) engaged in the new humanities classroom in practical exercises of strategic re-historization." A key aspect of Castillo's pedagogical approach lies in his theoretical commitment to the study of literature as institution: that is, to the notion that in reading now classical works, we must pay close attention to the processes whereby the proleptic constructs of literary canon production, described by David William Foster, have been naturalized by previous generations, often in the service of specific ideological projects. In a general sense, of course, this is how what was once entertainment now becomes literature; and the outcome of such realizations is the permissibility, even advantageousness, of juxtaposing literary classics with the products of contemporary popular culture. In theoretical terms, the methodology both pedagogical and scholarly that emerges from this kind of commitment is, like Nelson's, deeply indebted to Benjamin, and similarly critical of naïve historicism. As Castillo writes:

I would submit that if we think of Cervantes as an author-critic deeply concerned with the mass media of his time and its effect on readers and spectators, we must brush his writings against the grain of our own mass culture in order to do him "historical" justice; that is to say, in order to assess his full "historical" impact (32).

The classroom translation of this theoretical position involves, as Castillo describes, having students read a classic like *Don Quixote* in tandem with a series of "road movies" from the 1960s to the present, including *Easy Rider*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *The Motorcycle Diaries*. Such juxtapositions, he argues, "are all potentially 'productive' explorations of the Cervantine classic insofar as they direct our attention to different, but equally significant, dimensions of the novel" (37).

Relevance ought not be seen as merely a code word for complementarity. As Roy Ketchum argues in his exposition and analysis of the Argentine novelist Roberto Piglia's proposals for the future of literature, the peripheral status of most Hispanic literature in the academy is in some ways an advantage because of its destabilizing effects on disciplines. Whereas a "discipline prepares for success in a given field by teaching its students to speak the language of the prevailing orthodoxies," he continues, "literature at its best, has the capacity to teach one to listen to what is silenced by those orthodoxies" (171). Likewise, Stephanie Merrim's focus on the somewhat neglected existentialist influence on modern Latin American fiction highlights how a commitment in literature to, in Albert Camus's words, "living and thinking with . . . dislocations" in turn permits

those writers to “advance agendas that have specific relevance to and viable transformative potential for their own particular locations” (93). In the view of these authors, then, the disruptive potential of a relatively peripheral literature is a real benefit for a liberal arts curriculum that might otherwise come to be dominated by conformity and orthodoxy.

The contributions to the volume are too many and varied to discuss each in the detail it deserves, an exercise that, in any event, would make redundant the excellent introduction by Luis Martín-Estudillo and Nicholas Spadaccini. And it is with that piece that I would like to bring this afterword to a close. From the first glance I took at the volume, I was struck by a resonance between the book’s title and the title the editors gave their introduction. In the former they speak of “the question” of a liberal arts education as it relates to Hispanic literatures, whereas in the latter they argue for the centrality of literature in the “quest” for a liberal education. The partial homology is, in fact, revealing of the project of relevance, as it encompasses both the theoretical and pedagogical aspects I’ve described over the previous pages. While the place of literature in general, and Hispanic literatures in particular, is a vital theoretical question, such a question is inseparable from a quest that inspires or ought to inspire the practice of teaching.

What I find in common throughout all these essays is a commitment to what Martín-Estudillo and Spadaccini call literature’s “potential of making students more reflective members of the multiple communities to which they belong.” Likewise, while many disciplines are necessary constituents of the well-rounded individual and member of society that is the implicit quest of the liberal arts, the study of literature, and perhaps most intensely the literature of other cultures and languages, stands among those disciplines that most explicitly and consistently demonstrate how important questioning is to that quest. In a literature classroom today, as Edward Friedman argues in his essay, we seldom tell students what they ought to think. Rather, the entire orientation of our practice is toward questioning. We question literature for its meaning; and literature questions us for our values, our beliefs, our certainties, unsettling them at times and even upending them in its greatest moments of epiphany. “Das Fragen ist die Frömmigkeit des Denkens,” Heidegger once said.⁸ Questioning is the piety of thought. Which is another way of saying that thought should know no pieties. It is not faith-based, but radically open to otherness in all its forms. It is hard to imagine human progress in any form that is not accompanied and ultimately enabled by this fundamental aspect of creativity. And in this way there can be nothing more useful to the quests and questions that animate humanity than the study of literature.

Notes

1. According to the MLA's recent report, Spanish enrollments increased by over 10% between 2002 and 2006. While overall enrollment in foreign languages increased during the period, the authors note that "numbers of students attending institutions of higher education and enrollments in language courses are not equivalent groupings," and hence it is difficult to ascertain whether the overall increase represents relative increases or merely part of greater enrollments in post-secondary education (Furman).
2. "Will the Humanities Save Us?" by Stanley Fish. 6 Jan. 2008. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com>.
3. See Martha Nussbaum.
4. "SUNY Albany, Stanley Fish, and the Enemy Within" by Joshua Landy. 14 Oct. 2010. <http://arcade.stanford.edu>.
5. Landy references the article "I Think, Therefore I Earn" from the Guardian 19 Nov. 2007. <http://www.guardian.co.uk>.
6. See Anthony Close.
7. See Walter Benjamin.
8. See Martin Heidegger.

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