

REVIEW ARTICLE

SEEING A SPECIALIST: THE HUMANITIES AS ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

The humanities form a relatively small part of the modern research university, but they bulk very large in all discussions about the ‘idea’ or ‘purpose’ or ‘future’ of universities. This may not simply be because those who dilate on these matters are drawn disproportionately from humanities disciplines. It may also be because the discourse about the humanities has become a locus (and in some respects a placeholder) for wider anxieties about changing relations between culture and democracy, and between society and economy, as well as anxieties about the potentially damaging effects of professionalization and specialization. These anxieties have real objects as well as, like all anxieties, their exaggerated or phantasmatic features, and it is not always easy to distinguish between them. It is certainly true that, if we are to talk intelligently about the future of higher education in the twenty-first century, then we are seriously in need of a vocabulary and conceptual framework that challenge the ritualistic invocation of economic ‘growth’ as though that were a sufficient, or even a wholly intelligible, human end. Reflecting on the character of what we value about the humanities can often look to be the most easily available way to generate such a vocabulary.

Nonetheless, there are costs to this only partly conscious use of the category of ‘the humanities’ as a way of addressing these wider issues, not least the way in which it tends to make so much of the discourse about the humanities simultaneously too defensive and too pious. Almost any discussion or event with ‘the humanities’ in its title risks seeming both predictable and depressing. Predictable because we suspect that, after running through various travails and accusations, the humanities will by the end emerge in their full redemptive glory as the indispensable means of living a satisfactory human life (and, as the grand and pious adjectives pile up, it becomes hard to

suppress a yawn). And depressing because, despite the inevitable arrival of the 'deepest human values' cavalry to save the day, the story along the way is always one of being beleaguered and besieged, involving a tone that varies somewhere between the self-justifying and the complaining.

Among the several conspicuous merits of James Turner's learned, feisty book *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities*¹ is its attempt to shift the focus of discussion away from contemporary laments and justifications to a thickly textured, temporally extended history of the origins and developments of modern humanities disciplines. But, as its revisionist subtitle suggests, the book does nonetheless pack a weighty polemical punch, and certainly its wider cultural reception (it has been taken up in publications and other cultural media that do not normally attend to dense works of historical scholarship) suggests that the topic of 'the humanities' is now so heavily freighted with political and educational significance that there can be no, as it were, innocent discussions of the topic. And in fact, as I shall suggest, Turner's book does not really aspire to any such state of scholarly chastity: this is a book that does, explicitly as well as implicitly, attempt to occupy a highly controversial position on the terrain of contemporary cultural politics. Those who share that position have not been slow to extend the book a warm welcome for that reason. For example, writing under the title 'Can Philology Save the Humanities?' on the Minding the Campus website (supported by the right-wing Manhattan Institute for Policy Research), Peter Sacks has already claimed that the book 'offers a compelling solution to the splintered, increasingly irrelevant state of the humanities at modern universities. A return to philological thinking, Turner argues, would be an antidote to the loss of erudition, depth, breadth, and other maladies that plague the humanities in higher learning'.²

I shall leave discussion of, roughly, the first two and a half millennia covered in *Philology* to more competent readers and concentrate my remarks on the topic signalled by the title of part 3, 'The Modern Humanities in the Modern University'.

¹ James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton, 2014); page references to this book will be given in parentheses in the text.

² <http://www.mindingthecampus.org/2014/06/can_philology_save_the_humanit> (accessed 6 Apr. 2015).

Here I shall address, in necessarily brief and schematic terms, four broad questions. First, how far is ‘the humanities’ a usable organizing category for such a large-scale transhistorical and comparative enquiry? Secondly, is what the book says about the place of philology in the origins of the modern humanities disciplines persuasive? Thirdly, is the kind of history undertaken in this book capable of accounting for the development of disciplines and disciplinarity in general? And fourthly, what should we think or feel about the outcome of these processes in the present?

Taking up the first question, about the usability of the category of the humanities, it is clearly important to recognize, as Turner at times acknowledges, that this is a historically specific category. The relevant branches of learning were not collectively referred to as ‘the humanities’ before the early twentieth century, and so, in using the term to refer to forms of learning before then, we obviously have to exercise the same kind of care as we would when speaking heuristically of, say, ‘economics’ in the sixteenth century or ‘sociology’ in the seventeenth. But I would suggest that the modern use of ‘the humanities’ may be more specific and more institutionally contingent even than Turner allows. Although there are stray uses of it in English before 1914, it only starts to become widespread in the United States in the inter-war period and in Britain in the decades after 1945 (and it was still the case that institutionally ‘the arts’, as opposed to ‘the sciences’, was the much more common locution in Britain even then). To understand the enhanced currency and the particular valence of this usage, it is important to recognize that the category of ‘the humanities’ principally (though not exclusively) evolved as part of a defensive movement against the perceived challenge of a kind of positivism that claimed to be generalizing the methods of the natural sciences. This impulse, strongly evident in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, also meant that strenuous attempts were made to distinguish the humanities disciplines from those classified as ‘social sciences’, precisely because the latter seemed so much more hospitable to, or at ease with, the supposed methods of the natural sciences.³

³ On this history, see, among recent work, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (Chicago, 2011); Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford, 2013); Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London, 2012), ch. 4. For a
(cont. on p. 274)

But this enhanced self-consciousness, and especially the somewhat defensive insistence on the irreducible value of (predominantly literary) ways of studying the human, did not conveniently map onto the realities of institutional organization. In some places, history figured as one of the humanities, but in others as one of the social sciences, especially at those times when the impulse towards large-scale comparative social and economic history was particularly marked. Linguistics, an increasingly difficult activity to classify, fell on one side of this divide in some places and on the other elsewhere; in fact, its growing links with phonology and experimental psychology even led it to be housed in groupings of such sciences in some universities. Anthropology, which Turner makes salient in his account of the story, was more likely to be classed as a social science, even though it had roots in enquiries, such as the history of religion or the history of language, which had closer kinship with disciplines classed as humanities. And, of course, we are here talking only about arrangements in the Anglophone world. The cake was sliced very differently in France, where law was often the overarching faculty and where, for example, history was yoked with geography, not a subject that typically figured as one of the humanities in Britain or the United States. And although it is often claimed that ‘the humanities’ is the English equivalent of the German term *Geisteswissenschaften*, the latter was, from Dilthey onwards, a much more philosophically grounded distinction between forms of knowledge, usually employing some variant of a nomothetic–idiographic divide. Turner rightly makes the importing and emulating of German models central to his story of the growth of learning in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States, but it cannot really be said that what came with this inheritance was anything that closely resembled the usage of ‘the humanities’ after 1945 in British and American universities.

In other words, while we can use practically any category heuristically for the purposes of illuminating differences between past and present, if we claim to be telling a fully historical story about a particular intellectual development, as

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more idiosyncratic recent overview, see Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford, 2013).

Turner does, we have to be extremely careful not to let unacknowledged features of the semantic pull of our organizing term in the present impose themselves on the different realities of the past. If Turner's book were presented simply as a survey of historical and textual scholarship across several centuries of learning in Britain and the United States (a task it fulfils very impressively), the potentially anachronistic effects of seeing this as the story of 'the humanities' would not arise. However, this would not only mean claiming rather less by way of an originating or parenting role for philology, but it would also, as I shall go on to spell out, deprive the book of the polemical purchase on the present that comes from presenting itself as 'the origins of the humanities' — and it is that purchase that surely accounts for the exceptional level of attention the book has received.

On the second question, there can be no doubt that the critical and historical study of texts played a central role in the development of scholarship from the Renaissance to the late nineteenth century, and Turner documents this story in rich detail. But it is hard to see in what sense this is a 'forgotten' story: it might rather be thought of as the established or conventional emphasis in the history of humane learning across these centuries.⁴ How much polemical force attaches to the claim obviously depends a good deal on the sense of 'philology' that is in play. If we understand it as most students of language in Britain from the late nineteenth century onwards have understood it — as, roughly speaking, the study of the historical development of words and linguistic forms — the claim for its seminal role is self-evidently not persuasive. If, on the other hand, we understand it to signify pretty much any engagement with texts written in the past (and, of course, all texts are written in the past by the time we come to engage with them as texts), then it certainly seems central — but also too general to be credited with any explanatory force. Turner's usage is nearer to the second of these extremes, emphasizing *Quellenkritik* and the historicizing of all interpretation; indeed, the modern half of Turner's book can be seen as, in effect, the study of the impact and legacy of German historicism, but that

⁴ Perhaps Anthony Grafton has done more than any other single scholar to establish and document this story: among his many works, see, for example, *Worlds Made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009).

was such an encompassing methodological orientation that it becomes difficult to see a distinctive practice of philology as its originating source. It may be that, as with other large exercises in comparative intellectual history, we need some more systematic mapping of the semantic range of the term across periods and languages in order to make sure that our own usage retains its analytical bite and does not slide between historical senses, with all the attendant risks of either anachronism or circularity.⁵

More substantively, I suggest that there are at least two quite other intellectual strains that would need to be brought into the picture before we could even start to account for the forms taken by humanistic learning in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first and most important other strand is philosophy. Indeed, as compelling a story can be made for 'moral philosophy', in *its* broad eighteenth-century sense, as for philology as the matrix out of which much of the modern humanities syllabus derived, and I am a bit puzzled that Turner feels able to disregard it so easily. He claims that 'Philosophy's classification as one of the humanities in modern American higher education resulted only from administrative convenience and accident of timing' (p. 381), yet not only can something similar be said about most schemes for classifying the disciplines, but this seems to fly in the face of a substantive and well-documented history of the ways in which 'moral philosophy' in its eighteenth-century heyday broke up into and fertilized forms of learning as diverse as 'the history of civil society' or the development of belles-lettres. The second, lesser but not negligible, force is what we might broadly call 'the aesthetic'. It is difficult to account for the development of, say, the study of literature in vernacular and other modern languages, or the study of art history or of musicology and so on, purely in terms of traditions of textual scholarship. There were sources here arising out of the practices of taste, criticism and evaluation, opening out into a broader concern to understand and account for beauty.

I am not, I should make clear, arguing that any one such form of enquiry holds the key to the history of disciplinary development by itself, but I suggest that the growth of the

⁵ I have tried to make this case more fully, with particular reference to attempts to use the term 'intellectuals' in a transhistorical way, in Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford, 2006), ch. 2.

humanities disciplines in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries involved a constant interaction among at least these three strains as well as others. In some fields the balance tipped one way: the aesthetic may have been central to the evolution of art history out of connoisseurship but largely irrelevant to the growth of linguistics (in so far as that may be classified among the humanities). Sometimes the balance shifted over time: the study and teaching of English literature went through, and perhaps continues to go through, more or less theoretical, historical, evaluative and philological phases, without any one of them ever becoming the wholly settled identity of the subject. I would particularly suggest that the role of the philosophical strand is crucial if we are to understand why some of these subjects were thought to be suitable for a broad undergraduate education, something that was in turn the foundation of their expansion as scholarly enterprises. Philology could certainly offer one kind of training of the mind, but in the cultivation of *Bildung*, or the development of character, let alone in the making of citizens, the inheritance of moral philosophy was clearly better adapted to these larger educational purposes (which one might think of as being at the heart of, respectively, the German, English and French systems of higher education). The salience of the broad framework of moral philosophy is especially striking in Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and, as a result, it played a formative part in the Scottish-influenced colleges set up in colonial and antebellum America.⁶ In a different way, philosophy was central to French *lycée* and university education, and although France is not discussed in Turner's book, its intellectual traditions were not irrelevant to scholarship in certain subjects in Anglophone countries that the book does discuss, such as anthropology or religious studies, where the inheritance from philosophy was plainly visible.

In my view philology does not represent 'the forgotten origins of the modern humanities', as the subtitle to Turner's book has it, in part because philology is not in fact forgotten (there is a rich history of appeals to it in the last half-century or so, from Leo

⁶ See, for example, Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Mitten (eds.), *Scotland and America in the Age of Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1990).

Spitzer to Edward Said)⁷, and in still larger part because, whatever we understand by ‘the modern humanities’, we have to recognize that not only are their origins diverse but they are the outcome of various institutional and professional pressures rather than purely intellectual factors. In the prologue to his book, Turner says that what is needed is ‘a wide vista of the development of humanistic learning’ (p. xv). The book provides that very impressively, but I would just note that ‘the development of *humanistic learning*’ is not quite the same thing as ‘the origins of *the humanities*’, and the pedagogic and even civic aspirations now gestured to by that latter label may need to have their histories written in other terms.

That takes us on to the third large question, namely, how to understand and account for the growth of academic disciplines and the development of disciplinarity itself. Here, I must confess, I find Turner’s case a little hard to follow. Part of my difficulty may derive from a curious neglect or underplaying of institutional factors in Turner’s story. A remark that is buried away in a footnote to chapter 10 is revealing here. Referring to some of the ‘social and institutional forces’ that pushed Oxford and Cambridge towards establishing courses in English literature, he writes: ‘Were my subject the emergence of the humanities in university curricula rather than the development of the humanities as scholarly disciplines, I would pay attention to these “external” forces’ (p. 429 n. 5). But these are not in reality two distinct stories: ‘the humanities’, after all, has evolved as a label that chiefly refers to the study and teaching of certain fields *in universities*. Turner’s downplaying of the institutional setting gives some of his history a curiously voluntarist or individualist character. For example, he says at one point that the research university did not necessarily require disciplinarity — witness the productive scholars who scorned disciplinary lines — and he then cites four individuals: William James, Charles Eliot Norton, J. L. Myres and J. G. Frazer (p. 383). But this does not really help us to address the functionality of disciplines in validating and providing credentials for expert knowledge. Neither William James nor J. L. Myres, to take just two of the

⁷ Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics* (Princeton, 1948); Edward W. Said, ‘The Return to Philology’, in Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Basingstoke, 2004).

cited names, can usefully be said to 'scorn disciplinary lines': one worked within a broad understanding of philosophy which encompassed thinking about religion and psychology, while the other was a trained classicist who also wrote on archaeology and anthropology. In both cases these were in some sense accredited authorities with posts in discipline-specific university departments who extended their range over topics then very closely related to their main field of study. If anything, their example could be used to suggest the enabling power of their respective disciplinary identities in their own times. Here and elsewhere Turner can appear to be suggesting that it only needs sufficient energy and ambition from individual scholars for disciplinary divisions to be made irrelevant, though to my mind his examples all suggest quite the opposite conclusion, namely, that the institutional setting within which these develop profoundly shapes the kind of work that even the most ambitious or 'transgressive' scholars can do.

Although both Turner and I might describe ourselves as, among other things, intellectual historians, we here come up against the limits of how far this large topic can be adequately understood exclusively in terms of intellectual history. Surely 'the origins of the modern humanities' must in considerable part be accounted for in sociological and institutional terms. If we compare the world of humane learning in, say, 1800 with that in, say, 1950, the overwhelmingly most important contrast lies not in changes in ideas but in the fact that by the later date practically everyone who cultivated these studies was employed in an institution of higher education, whereas at the earlier date very few of them were: they were, at least in Britain, mostly gentlemen of private means, members of the clergy, retired military men, private tutors, librarians, lawyers, diplomats and so on. Disciplines are in part an institutional expression of society's need to know that its proclaimed experts are experts indeed.⁸ A late eighteenth-century squire who published a book on a subject in which he was woefully ignorant of the latest theories and scholarship might have been mocked by the savants of the day, but there would have been no serious

⁸ For a still-useful conspectus of the key period in the development of modern academic disciplines, see Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (eds.), *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860–1920* (Baltimore, 1979).

institutional consequences for him or his estates. A late twentieth-century professor who did the same would have been jeopardizing both his career and the reputation of the university itself. This is obviously not a story that can be understood simply as an increase in the intellectual timidity of particular individuals.

And this leads on to my fourth large question: how we should feel about the outcome. I am struck that the long-term changes charted by Turner's work are figured as a 'fall', that the defining movement is from 'unity' to 'fragmentation', that disciplines are described as 'peculiarly cramping', that the development of disciplines is judged to have been an 'unfortunate outcome' and so on (pp. 383 ff.). Animating his work, it seems to me, and giving it a sense of energy and purpose, is a yearning that we might live in a time when the cultivated scholar could take all humane learning as his or her bailiwick, unhampered by the professional and institutional constraints that force contemporary scholars to confine themselves to one sorry little patch. While I recognize *some* of what might be attractive about this picture, I have to say it is a yearning which I do not share, a yearning that may bespeak a wider declinism or cultural pessimism about the contemporary world, and such pessimism can be a perspective that is more likely to obstruct than to extend our understanding of the history of scholarship and the role of the university.

When I am about to undergo brain surgery, I shall want to know that I am in the hands of a narrow specialist, no matter how much more agreeable it might be to chat to a surgeon who, in addition to developing a side-line in brain surgery, has excelled in studying ancient archaeology and translating Dante. For similar reasons, I'm not convinced that what today's academics really need is to release their inner Charles Eliot Norton (as Turner, who wrote an earlier, admiring book on him, can at times appear to suggest). After all, we should remember that one of the most famous imagined examples of wide-ranging scholarship untrammelled by the work of specialists (above all, fatefully, German specialists) was George Eliot's Mr Casaubon, and it's hard not to feel that a spot of constraining disciplinarity and the criticism of an established scholarly community would have been no bad thing in his case. I really do not see why we should speak, as Turner does, of the subdivision of learning into disciplines as 'artificial' and 'a sham', nor why we should think of disciplines purely in terms of erecting what he calls 'barricades' to keep

people in or out (p. 385). Disciplines are in part what enable us to harness collective endeavour to extend our understanding of a given subject and to validate our conclusions. There is certainly much about the current condition of universities to be critical of, but I do not believe any of these problems would be solved by trying to re-create the conditions in which it is alleged that philology could seem to represent a unified and comprehensive field of humane learning. Whether Turner is actually proposing, quixotically, that we should somehow try to 'return' to a philological Eden, or whether the story of a 'lost' earlier state is chiefly just a stick with which to beat what he sees as the overdeveloped professionalism of modern scholarship, there is clearly a risk (whatever his own informing intentions) that the case he argues in this book will be recruited to serve the needs of those conservative critics of the contemporary university who see disciplinary specialization as indicating the betrayal of 'the general reader' and as an example of professional self-interest conspiring against the public.

We should not let an understandable unease with the potentially narrowing consequences of specialization provide ammunition for these tendentious and reactionary critiques. The sheer scope of Turner's own impressive book shows that it is still possible for modern scholars to range very widely indeed. At the same time, the claims advanced in his (or anyone else's) book have to stand the test of being scrutinized by the acknowledged experts in each of the fields it touches, and those are tests of their relation to the relevant evidence and the existing scholarly literature as well as of rigour, coherence and persuasiveness, tests which are not the achievement or the property of any one individual. Those tests are how, collectively, we now judge the merits of any offered contribution to scholarship — they enact the standards of the relevant disciplines — and I cannot believe that we should want to have it otherwise.

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