

Why We Need the Humanities

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Why, for thousands of years, have people read Homer's *The Iliad*? Why is it considered one of the most powerful pieces of world literature? Though about war, it is not read for the tactics and strategies of warcraft – Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian Wars* serves that purpose. *The Iliad*, I would argue serves another, and more important, one.

When King Priam comes to beg Achilles for the body of his son Hector, which Achilles has dragged around the battlefield behind his horse, we are in the presence of a scene that evokes far more than the material consequences of war. This scene in particular, and *The Iliad* in general, provides us with a metaphor for how we are all reduced by war: reduced to inhumane, prideful cruelty; reduced to mere violated flesh; reduced to begging for basic human decency. Homer does not end his great epic poem

with pomp or with the abstractions of glory and nation. Rather, he ends with the specificity of a father bringing home the body of his beloved child. He ends by showing the human tragedy and utter futility of war, and with the lessons of mercy, integrity, humility, and empathy.

These values are still written by writers, pondered by philosophers, queried by historians, danced by dancers, and painted by artists in a mode that one great teacher of mine characterized as “felt thought.” The humanities remind us that facts mean nothing without analysis, analysis means little without the engagement of the sympathies. And sympathies mean little until they transform the self and psyche, and are then translated into action or effect – often subtle – in the realm of the communal and social.

To the widespread dismissal of the humanities as “just about feelings” – which they are not – I would say that the statement itself speaks volumes about the value of feelings in contemporary U.S. culture at large. And I remind us that feelings – not sentiment, which poet Wallace Stevens called the pornography of feeling -- include empathy, sympathy, passion for justice, care. The failure to live in accordance with such values has led to the present situation: warmongering, continuing colonization, the nationalism that creates the foreigners against whom those who came much

later rail as “damned immigrants,” the demonizing of the other – defined in as many ways as there are hatreds to justify – the destruction of the planet, and the genocidal decimation and the attempted cultural obliteration of the communities who have protected and honored the earth for thousands of years.

But this is not all due to a just general failure of feeling. It is, perhaps more importantly the failure of that which characterizes all the humanities across various disciplines: it is the failure of the imagination. The refusal, in the words of Avery Gordon, to “imagine otherwise.”

The imagination is, by definition and deployment, dangerous. To imagine is to think and feel outside the given, to act beyond the boundaries of the assumed, the “commonsense,” the already accepted.

Words, linked to the imagination, are dangerous. Why is it that in so many repressive political regimes, it is the artists and thinkers who represent the greatest threat. The imagination and the literature that is born from it, as Barbara Christian points out, “embod[ies] ideas and recreate[s] the world,” and this represents a profound threat to those who are invested politically, socially and psychically in the way things are (or “have always been”).

Think of Czeslaw Milosz, Anna Akhmatova, Allen Ginsberg. Think of our own colleague Chris Abani. Poet Federico Garcia Lorca was assassinated

by Franco's right wing government. In the United States, artists and thinkers may not be shot, but they are patronizingly ignored as irrelevant do-gooders, kooks or cranks. Or, as with Langston Hughes, they are turned into entertainment and spectacle.

Why is this? It is because the power to imagine otherwise is dangerous. Words and their meanings, and the ability to use the power of felt thought to see beyond and beneath the armature of denotative language is dangerous to those who depend upon a world, as E.M. Forster called it, of "telegrams and anger." The imagination threatens because it requires felt thought about the possibilities beyond the given; it is analysis and critique joined with creativity and speculation. The imagination opens up vistas that encourage you to think and feel yourself as someone outside of and beyond and different from what you are told you are. To think and feel a world that can be other than what it is. To have the insight to see what is not given, what is hidden or obscured, and to see ruptures, continuities, contradictions and confluences, where others see, as Stevens wrote, the paucity of "things exactly as they are."

Studying the humanities keeps us connected to these values. To be humane, to have a sense of humanity, to humanize -- all these terms are based in the values of benevolence, compassion, care, tenderness, kindness,

sympathy. These are not “bleeding heart” values. In fact, they are the most difficult to enact (there’s a reason why there’s only one Dalai Lama, after all). And far from being merely the means to self-improvement, the humanities are founded upon asking, rigorously and continuously, “Why?” Why is there human suffering? Why are we put on this earth? Why is it the nature of evil not to be spectacular but, as Hannah Arendt famously put it, banal? Why is self-interest ethical but perhaps not moral?

And attached to these questions of *why* is the key question *how*: How do we walk through the world as human beings – not as monsters, not as machines, not as economic units, skill sets or cognitive bundles, but as human beings amongst others who are also accorded their full complex and contradictory humanness.

I think it’s time to critically reappropriate the human. Contemporary scholars, philosophers and academics are right to question the term “human” and its long history as a generalizing abstraction that has been deployed to uphold the status quo by flattening out disparities of power and privilege. Too many conversations have not happened, too many contestations quashed in the name of a universalizing humanness that has, in fact, never been universal, but rather particular and privileged.

But how many conversations also do not happen because so many in the humanities have ceded the terms and language that have long found a disciplinary home nowhere else? How many productive wrestlings do not occur because, like Achilles, we drag behind our ideological horses the language of the soul and of the spirit?

We cannot give up that language, cannot help to dismiss the humanities by regarding them as merely the repository of a dead canonical tradition that preserves privilege and personhood to a select master few.

A critical humanism wherein the term human is a starting point, not a terminus, a frame for thinking about difference rather than a filter to gate-keep and maintain a reductive similarity, can both continue to ask the life-deepening questions the humanities prompt and encourage the analytic, critical, creative and imaginative work that leads us, in Avery Gordon's words, "to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there."

The humanities, again, push us to see what isn't there, to imagine what is absent. And it is the very condition of absence that is the ground for desire, and desire is always about change. Though both can function in the realm of the trivial and self-centered, here I'm talking about desire and change in the largest sense.

Let me end with a bit of a poem by Mark Doty. This poem takes place while the speaker is attending a local choir concert. The chorus isn't a professional one: the speaker sees a neighbor "who fights operatically with her girlfriend," a guy from the grocery store, the postal clerk. As they imperfectly bring their voices to the musical score at hand, here's what Doty writes:

If art's
acceptable evidence,

mustn't what lies
behind the world be at least
as beautiful as the human voice?

....

Aren't we enlarged
by the scale of what we're able
to desire? Everything
the choir insists,

might flame;
inside these wrappings
burns another, brighter life,
quicken, now,

by song: hear how
it cascades, in overlapping,
lapidary waves of praise? Still time.
Still time to change.

The poem begins with difference, moves through recognizing the beauty of the human voice in all its imperfection, and ends with transformation and

what Adrienne Rich calls the will to change. And change doesn't happen on its own; it doesn't happen through some vague notion of the beauty of art. The word "lapidary" is crucial here: it refers to the working of stone, as in sculpture or gem-craft. That which transforms us beyond the constricting circumference of our diurnal, ego-driven selves is a made thing, created by human imagination and labor and the desire for something different and more. This is what the humanities do: they remind us we can be different and more, and that, collectively, we must raise our voices and work with what is best and most imperfect in ourselves to get there.