
A Dean's Perspective

Author(s): David Marshall

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A Dean's Perspective

DAVID MARSHALL

As a dean of humanities and fine arts at a public university, I see it as part of my job to make the argument that the humanities are at work in the world. In his president's column about the Presidential Forum panels in the Winter 2007 *MLA Newsletter*, Michael Holquist referred to "the complex utility of the humanities" (3). There are risks in making utilitarian arguments about the value and values of the humanities, but there are also risks in not making such arguments, since other disciplines constantly make them, and the fate of the humanities within the university—the valuation of their labor, their market share of student enrollments, the respect for their research—depends on how the humanities are valued by the world outside the academy and how they are valued within the academy by students and colleagues in other fields.

I often talk about a 2002 *New York Times* profile of the only financial reporter to warn of Enron's fatal fiscal problems. The *Fortune Magazine* reporter Bethany McLean, at first the Cassandra of the business world, attributed her ability to read Enron's books while everyone else sang its fortunes to her liberal arts education, in particular to her double major in English and math. "When you come out of a liberal arts background," she said, "you want to know why something is the way it is." In accounting, "there is no reason why. There is no fundamental truth underlying it." McLean credits her liberal arts background with enabling her to see

The author is professor of English and comparative literature, dean of humanities and fine arts, and executive dean of the College of Letters and Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara. A version of this paper was presented at the 2007 MLA convention in Chicago.

Enron's mathematical fictions and "the fundamental economic reality" that accounting ignored (Barringer). Her training in literature and math allowed her to deconstruct accounting's nonreferential system—as if her insight that there was no fundamental truth underlying Enron's economic reality had led her to discover that Arthur Anderson had hired Jacques Derrida to do Enron's books. Although literary critics have been accused of undermining our belief in truth and reality, meaning and value, McLean suggests that the spreadsheets of accounting contained empty fictions in which meaning had no value and value had no meaning, while literature allowed her to read the truth behind the figures.

Many economic arguments can be made about the work of the humanities in the world. Nonprofit arts organizations and activities add \$5.4 billion a year to California's economy. American corporations spend \$3.1 billion annually on remedial writing for their employees—and this expense doesn't include the cost of lawsuits caused by badly written e-mails. The California Economic Development Corporation has called for stronger requirements for foreign languages and cultures (*Arts*), and even the Department of Defense has called for the cultivation of stronger foreign language and cultural competencies in order to strengthen national security and economic competitiveness and to maintain our power in the global economy (see *Call to Action*). In a 2006 *Washington Post* article, Duke University President Richard Brodhead, addressing the question of whether higher education in the United States is "training the workforce needed to win in a global economy," especially in science and math, noted that Chinese educators envied the American system and feared that Asian higher education was "short on creativity and that the very strengths of their system may prevent the fostering of a versatile, innovative style of intelligence that will be the key to future economic advancement." Brodhead suggests that our "liberal arts model of education" promotes "initiative, independence, resourcefulness and collaboration."

What is at stake, of course, is more than economic competitiveness. McLean brought to *Fortune* the skills of someone trained in close reading and critical analysis. These modes of attention, along with communication and creativity, are crucial not only to the workforce that we need to compete in the twenty-first century but also to our democratic institutions. In our multicultural and multilingual global society (exemplified today by California) we need citizens who understand the languages and cultures of other traditions. Global challenges, as well as our increasing cultural diversity at home, necessitate the knowledge of the past and the comparative methods of interpretation that the humanities can teach us. One of the paradoxes for Americans in the information age is that global-

ization threatens to impose a culture of sameness throughout the world while simultaneously challenging us with a culture of difference at home. English dominates the Internet and asserts itself as the universal language, yet over three hundred languages are spoken by children in public schools in California alone. As we negotiate the complicated and unstable terms of identity and difference, we need to engage in acts of both linguistic and cultural translation.

Our literature departments have only begun to abandon their identities as national literature departments or foreign language and literature departments. In the age of *Google Translator*, the humanities must work to promote the necessity of translation while underlining the difficulty and even impossibility of translation, to assert the very foreignness of language at a time when the term *foreign* is increasingly unstable. In this context, it is important to think about Holquist's reminder that language is "the MLA's middle name" (3). The work of the humanities is threatened by the prospect that literature will be seen as a foreign language, an endangered language with few remaining native speakers. Yet it is also threatened by the prospect that literature will not be seen as foreign, that all language and media will be seen as (and expected to be) transparent. Part of our work is to return foreignness to language, to insist that meaning in the text and in the world must be found through acts of interpretation and translation, by reading and attending to the stories of both self and other and to the stories told by language itself. I suggest that teaching this familiar foreignness could allow us to rediscover our work in the world.

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