

# Patricia Meyer Spacks & Leslie Berlowitz

## *Reflecting on the humanities*

The essays assembled here enact as well as reflect the humanities. As they explore the twenty-first-century state of humanistic study and humanistic commitment, they exemplify historical awareness, analytic power, and critical consciousness. In all their variety and energy, these essays demonstrate that the humanities remain alive and well—despite inadequate funding, insufficient jobs, and widespread misunderstanding of what, exactly, humanistic study involves and offers to society: all topics that appear in this collection.

The confidence marking these reflections combines with a sense of urgency. The essayists project confidence not because they believe that everyone understands the importance of the humanities or because they think that all problems have been solved: quite the contrary. They delineate a set of ongoing issues, both practical and theoretical. Their confidence comes from conviction of their enterprise's value; their urgency at least partly from the need to make that value more apparent.

Humanists now have a new sense of their undertaking. Acknowledging problems in their situation and their practices, they discover and embrace fresh possibilities. Accustomed to ask-

ing large questions, humanists requested to reflect on their enterprise ask them. They offer provocative answers that often lead to further questions.

We read that humanistic knowledge is the necessary foundation of a democratic society; it can even provide a valuable basis for a career in business. We learn that the humanities reflect their times, even as they bring the past to bear on the present. To think of the “extreme imaginative poverty” of a world without literature reveals something of what the humanities do. Historians continue to find themselves under great pressure, but an evolving “postmodern” perspective might help them. Such observations suggest the range of concerns touched on here.

Arguably as significant and as important as the content of these essays is their tone. The sense of assurance conveyed by the reflections here contrasts with the atmosphere of the memorable volume published in 1997, *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, edited by Alvin Kernan, which suggested how much had gone wrong. Some of the difficulties identified by the writers in Kernan's book have actually worsened. Thus Harriet Zuckerman and Ronald Ehrenberg, examining the current state of funding for the humanities in a thoughtful, well-documented essay, conclude that there is “some [cause] for pessi-

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mism, and much that leads to uneasiness” in the chronic underfunding experienced by the humanistic disciplines. They do not expect matters to improve any time soon, given that “the benefits the academic humanities confer on society are not understood well enough, by a sufficient number” – a problem that the present collection tries to address. Libraries face crises not only of funding but of space, of use, and of accessibility. Young academics have difficulty finding publishers and distinguishing themselves in a crowded profession. Those professing the digital humanities find conventional departments reluctant to use scarce resources to explore potential new directions.

Nonetheless, the writers of these reflections, from various professional perspectives (philanthropist, university president, provost, former college president, foundation executives, leading members of the professoriate), look to the future with hope and with imagination. James O’Donnell points out that there is every reason for pessimism about the future – but also every reason for optimism. He raises many questions, pointing out the need for “a combination of original work and imaginative presentation”; and he clearly believes such combination possible. Edward Ayers calls on the humanities to “put themselves in play, at risk, in the world.” Caroline Bynum imagines a way to combat excessive pressure on young academics by using insights gained from the recent studies of history as a discipline. Kathleen Woodward describes the ways serious scholarship is brought to the wider public.

Communicating the excitement of intellectual possibility, these essays dramatize the humanities’ inclusiveness: the diversity of individual contributions suggests the range of approach-

es within the broad category of humanistic enterprise. Don Randel claims as a domain of the humanities “the study of, contemplation of, and exploration of what it means to be a human being.” To engage in such study demands a broad spectrum of resources. The present collection deploys many of them.

Contributors to this group of essays had available to them a collection of new data documenting the state of the humanities in our nation. The American Academy has recently introduced the Humanities Indicators prototype, an online resource containing seventy-four indicators and over two hundred graphs and charts tracking trends in five areas: primary and secondary education; undergraduate and graduate education; the humanities workforce; humanities research and funding; and the humanities in American life. This prototype was inspired by the thirty-six-year-old *Science and Engineering Indicators* of the National Science Foundation, which has been indispensable to educators and policy-makers interested in America’s competitiveness in science and technology. Until now, no comparable compendium of data about the state of the humanities has existed. As a result, Francis Oakley has noted:

Generalizations made about the humanities, whether critical or supportive, have tended to be characterized by a genial species of disheveled anecdotalism, punctuated unhelpfully from time to time by moments of cranky but attention-catching dyspepsia.<sup>1</sup>

1 Francis Oakley, from his presentation about the Academy’s Initiative for Humanities and Culture, October 11, 2008, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Academy's efforts to remedy this situation have proceeded along two parallel tracks: the development of the Humanities Indicators, based on *existing* data, and the Humanities Departmental Survey project, the collection of *new* data. The Humanities Departmental Survey was sent to 1,485 departments in seven humanities disciplines: history, religion, English, foreign language, history of science, art history, and linguistics. The survey covers such topics as faculty hiring patterns, faculty teaching loads, faculty policies, tenure policies, teaching and instruction, and aspects of the student experience.

The American Academy has played a pivotal role in establishing such important institutions as the American Council of Learned Societies, the Independent Research Libraries Association, the National Endowment for the Humanities,

the Council of American Overseas Research Centers, and the National Humanities Center. The Initiative for Humanities and Culture, launched in 1998, continues the Academy's effort to advance and advocate for the humanities.

Projects under the auspices of the Initiative have involved hundreds of participants, sponsored original research, and produced several published volumes of essays exploring the state of the humanities and the evolution of its disciplines and institutions. We anticipate that ongoing projects of the Initiative, like the Humanities Indicators, along with public forums including this special issue of *Dædalus*, will continue to provide serious reflections on the humanities, inspire new ideas, and generate new conversations about the vital role the humanities play in American life.

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