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Book Review: *Humanities in America: A Report to the President, the Congress, and the American People*

Anthony Parise
Grand Valley State University

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Book Reviews

Lynne V. Cheney: *Humanities in America: A Report to the President, the Congress, and the American People*. National Endowment for the Humanities, September 1988.

Speaking for the Humanities: A Report from the American Council of Learned Societies, in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 11, 1989, A-11-A-22.

Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is
For that the poet is always in the sun,

Patches the moon together in his room
To his Virgilian cadences, up down,
Up down. It is a war that never ends.

Wallace Stevens

As a rule, due reverence for the gift of life forbids the waste of that precious substance on official documents. Nonetheless, anyone casually curious about the Humanities War, the issues and the stakes, could in a short time satisfy that curiosity with these latest communiques, for they are brief (about 15,000 words each, I would guess). Though both call themselves "reports," both are manifestoes, declaring positions and soliciting the adhesion of the reader. As manifestoes, both tend to the polemical; no one would call them lively but such vigor as they have depends upon their tone of conviction, or even self-righteousness. Neither really argues, though both make an assiduous pretense at argument, sometimes with statistics, often with appeals to authority, most often by ringing affirmation. Each depends on the other, for they are direly opposed.

As with most wars, the origins of this one

are obscure. Maybe it all started back in the 60's, with all that radical ferment that we associate with such tags as civil rights, open enrollments, relevance, affirmative action, SDS, gay and lesbian rights, and perhaps most important, a real war, a nasty war that engendered much national self-loathing, together with even more patriotism, especially among non-combatants. Or maybe the Humanities War started with Ronald Reagan, who was determined that the "Western tradition," in its natural colors of red, white, and blue, should again stand tall; for sure William Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy* is one of the main events of the war. Or maybe the war goes all the way back to Heidegger and Nietzsche, for so avers Allan Bloom, whose own book must be the war's most spectacular phenomenon. (Yes, that's an erudite pun.)

Now, with clear intent to consolidate the advances made by Bennett and Bloom, comes this report from Lynne Cheney, Bennett's successor as chairman of the NEH. (We might call their side the Whites.) A true staff officer, Cheney deployed "three advisory groups in Washington" and "experts in the humanities at fourteen regional forums," and then prepared this report (v). It is without question puerile, as though Cheney really envisioned Reagan as the target audience. Nonetheless, with admirable concision it reveals what this modern war is all about.

"The humanities," in Cheney's unexceptionable definition, "move us with images, arguments, and stories about what it means to be human: to be mortal and to mourn mortality for ourselves and those we love; to know joy and find purpose, nonetheless; to be capa-

ble of good and evil, wisdom and folly" (7). Understood in such terms, the humanities engage or ought to engage all of us, not just scholars — those professional humans — but people generally. And, says Cheney, the people are "enthusiastic" in their engagement, and she has statistics to prove it: data on humanities councils, library programs, historical associations, patronage of a "historical documentary," money spent on "cultural events" in comparison to "sports events," and on and on. The humanities are alive and flourishing with the people.

All the trouble comes from the mandarins of culture — the professionals, the scholars, which is to say the professors. (The Reds, we might call them.) These intellectual types, having infiltrated academe in the late 50's and 60's have in effect wrested from the people what is theirs by natural right. The result: two opposed cultures, "the academy and society" (10). Another case, as Chaucer would say, of the "shiten shepherde and a clene sheep."

Two complementary forces account for this professorial *coup de main*: specialization and Marxism. (Cheney never invokes Great Karl by name but he is there, immanent, in her words. Probably with good reason.) Specialization leads scholars to forget that humane study, since it concerns love, death, and purpose, should serve everyone who worries about such matters. But specialists learn to talk to other specialists, not to students, not to people generally. They find honor only through "publication in refereed journals" (11). In consequence, teaching is neglected and the language of specialists becomes as exclusive as a secret handshake, and as trivial. Furthermore, insofar as these anti-social types teach at all, they produce clones of themselves. To this effect Cheney quotes Leon Kass: "Students are drawn into second-order

scholarly concerns even before they have directly experienced the texts and the *human concerns* that moved the authors to write them" (11).

All this is as familiar as it is important — and on this matter I think Cheney's position, as distinct from her argument, is probably right, or at least ponderable, especially when she speaks of the scientism of the humanities, that drive to pattern humane "research" on the scientific model. Of course, Cheney will convince no one with her hasty accusations, but since she speaks for the NEH, with some lovely money to dispense, she may inspire a high-powered thinker to argue her case; if so, we'll all benefit.

While the nature of humanities research is of enormous intellectual interest, if the president (past or present) indeed reads this report, he will find the section on "Politics and the Curriculum" closer to his ideological heart. For Cheney directs against the professors the same charge which the Right levels against the mass media: to wit, they are following a liberal agenda. The professors subvert "Western civilization" by taking a Marxist view of its cultural triumphs. For Cheney the Western heritage is a compendium of "truths that pass beyond time and circumstance; truths that, transcending accidents of class, race, and gender, speak to us all" (14). The professors, on the other hand, see these same triumphs as the means, consciously intended or otherwise, of justifying and perpetuating those injustices useful to the ruling class. Thus, says Cheney, "Teaching becomes a form of political activism, with texts used to encourage students, in the words of one professor, to 'work against the political horrors of our time'" (12).

The horrors of our time? The real horror, for Cheney, is that anyone would focus on horrors (or "errors," as she prefers):

Are [Western civilization and the American society] productive mainly of “political horrors” or have they not also seen [sic] splendid achievements, persistent self-examination, and decided progress toward the goal of recognizing the dignity of every human being? . . . In what other civilization have women and ethnic minorities advanced further? In what other society has social mobility so mitigated the effect of class? (12)

Cheney never mentions the R-word — relativism — but her affinities with Bloom and Bennett bring the word to mind. She knows, or at least says, that “The Western tradition is a debate,” as opposed to a “consensus” (12). But, I think, she cannot accommodate herself to the uncertainties, indeed the anxieties, that such a view entails. Nor does she want those uncertainties communicated to the young; she is horrified that students may ask of a text not wherein lies its “truth and beauty and excellence” but rather “what groups did the authors of these works represent” (12). She worries thus: “What images of human possibility will American society put before its members? . . . will it find a place for grace, elegance, nobility . . . ?” (3) Such worries are by no means foolish or inconsequential; only the stoniest cynic would mock them. But I rather think that Cheney values high culture as an anodyne.

The amusing part of this report deals with television. Perhaps it is inevitable that anyone so bullish on America should find television a positive force, another tool to be used for good or ill, as society determines. Implicit in the Industrial Revolution — the West’s most violent contribution to civilization — is the faith that moral, social, and pedagogical problems can be solved by new technologies, especially those driven by market forces.

Cheney shares that faith.

Cheney notes in the most perfunctory way that Neil Postman is “concerned” about television as a “seductive” force, but in her entire paper she indicates no awareness of the savagery and, in my view, the lethal cogency of Postman’s assault on television. For him, television is not a neutral tool to be used for good or evil any more than Mephistophilis is a dutiful servant. But Cheney knows nothing about any of this. So she offers a virtually unqualified encomium of television. What she says is not worth re-stating: those tired assurances that television is a medium distinct from print, that television gets to those who won’t read and eventually sells them books, that television “is not going to go away” (12), that “scholars” might as well become involved so that “television educates rather than misinforms” (21), that television can become “our Lyceum, our Chautauqua, our Minsky’s, and our Camelot” (22). (Well, she may be right about Minsky’s.)

Cheney’s comments on television are amusing because they are conditioned reflexes, thought patterns shaped by television. Here is her notion of how television might promote an activity better than television: “It would also be helpful, particularly in encouraging young people to read, . . . if series like ‘The Cosby Show’ and ‘Kate and Allie’ showed books as an important presence” (20). It is revealing to see how Cheney uses the testimony of her many experts. Over and over, she introduces them as “author X” or “Professor Y” or “Dean Z,” as though this helps identify the expert or certify the expertise. And then almost invariably follows a vapid and unsupported opinion — the roving reporter holding the microphone before the man on the street: “‘I simply reject the idea,’ [publisher Ellendea Proffer] said, ‘that only reading is good in an

intellectual sense” (19). So much for that sound byte. Or another example:

“When I teach a class I find my students’ imaginations are much more fully stocked with vivid images of the rest of the world than mine was when I was young,” [philosopher Michael] Novak observed. “When I say ‘armed guerrilla,’ they have a mental picture of an armed guerrilla and know just how heavily armed they are. Students don’t learn that from newspapers.” (18)

In the last section of this report — to my mind the most engaging — Cheney suggests ways of bringing together art, literature, history, philosophy, and the people. The ways include museum exhibits and tours, historical reconstructions (like colonial Williamsburg), “courses in Latin and Greek in small towns” (24), lectures and Chautauquas and the like. Such outreach programs would be good for the scholar and good for the people. I agree, and would add that if generously funded, such a national effort would expand and diversify the intelligentsia. It would, in effect, promote what Adam Smith has for 200 years forbidden: the use of wealth for purposes other than the production of more wealth, the use of wealth for humane purposes. (Such use implies a no-growth economy — a good thing, in my view.)

I am not sure Cheney sees how revolutionary her suggestions are. It may be that she does not have mega-dollars in mind, for she seems to imply the efficient use of the mass media, of technology. She may not realize that it will do no good to have the few talking to the many; it is necessary that people, many learned people, talk to people who can talk back. That means small groups — and more money than lip readers want to pay.

Speaking for the Humanities speaks, actually,

for the American Council of Learned Societies and, less officially, for professorial humanists. It was written by five directors of humanities institutes and a dean of graduate studies, hereinafter called the Learned Speakers. They are moved to speak, stung, by “the popular indictment of the humanities” (11). But how does a “popular indictment” manifest itself? The speakers imagine that the popular sentiment is expressed by Bennett, Bloom, and Cheney and so react against this trio. “These attacks would be comic,” the Speakers observe, but since they are “politically significant” and “taken so seriously by so many people,” the Speakers feel constrained to mount a serious counterattack.

Speaking for the Humanities is more sophisticated, more thoughtprovoking, than Cheney’s report. Not that it is without its own comic moments — as, for example, when the Speakers solemnly refer “To the many who have devoted their lives to work in the humanities” (11). They refer not to those who surrender themselves to a divine call to bring light to dark and dangerous continents but to us professors, to people with comfortable, secure, enjoyable work, to the occupationally privileged in a world where, by and large, work means violence to human dignity. But I will suppress all reference to the inadvertent humor of the Speakers, for what they say deserves our attention, maybe even our devotion.

One of the most serious charges against the humanities in the academy is that specialization, appropriate enough in the sciences, where division of labor is made possible by a controlling paradigm, works against the humane endeavor to see things whole. The Speakers’ defense against this charge is cursory and implausible but its flaws are quite revealing. In dealing with jargon, they do not

ask why and when the special lingo of a discipline is useful. What little I know about economic jargon suggests that it promotes precision and efficiency of discourse. Does literary jargon, sometimes known as Theoryspeak, have such virtues? Good question, which the Speakers only beg. They assert that if jargon is good in physics, it must be good in the humanities: "We do not expect physicists to work within their disciplines only in a language that non-physicists might comprehend. Physicists speak to a popular culture only when they are not doing the scientific work that makes a difference in their fields" (12).

Thus not only do the Speakers fail to make a case for the Choctaw of scholarly writing but they unwittingly confess their science envy — exactly Cheney's accusation. They offer three examples of specialized research that yields "significant implications." One is taken from biology: that old standby, "the inherited characteristics of fruit flies" (12). Another is taken from anthropology: Clifford Geertz's "study of Balinese cockfighting" — which is not about cockfighting unless *Moby Dick* is about whaling (12). The third is Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*. These examples are ill chosen partly because two of them are not from the humanities and partly because Geertz and Davis avoid jargon and speak to people generally about things that matter to people generally. And to imagine that Geertz, who takes all learning as his province, went to Bali to study cockfighting is either sad or funny.

The Speakers further discredit their case by the gratuitous venom they direct against "amateurs — belle lettrists" (12). They flummox against the "gentlemanly ideal: a vision of the humanities as repository of known truths and received values, which a non-

professional corps of collectors present to the young" (12). The problem here is not just the straw man ruse: exactly who are these effete and la-de-da amateurs? And if they exist and are a really bad lot, how does that shore up the case for specialization? More important, it seems the Speakers have not reflected on the dangers of "professionalism" or they would not again and again use the word as an unqualified encomium.

The Speakers behave a little more like detached thinkers in the section titled "Objectivity and Ideology," where they deny all possibility of detached thought. In responding to the charge of "relativism" and "politicized teaching," they point out that the objectivity and authority we usually attribute to science have been undermined by theoreticians in all disciplines, including the sciences: "the consensus of most of the dominant theories is that all thought does, indeed, develop from particular standpoints, perspectives, interests" (14). *Consensus* is a code word; decoded (or encoded anew) it means that all we will ever know of truth is expert opinion, or, more accurately, the collective opinion at any given moment of specialists, professionals.

Interests is a key word throughout this paper, for underlying everything the Speakers say is the belief that all acts, including speech acts and thoughts, are efforts to impose self upon the world. Such a view leads to a curious combination of cynicism and idealism. On the one hand, they see past cultural monuments as attempts to "promote as a norm the concerns of a particular group and set aside as partial or limited those of other groups" (16). But on the other hand the Speakers themselves are moved to promote not their own interests but those of minorities, women, "the powerless, the illiterate, the dispossessed" (22).

Perhaps there is no inconsistency here. Per-

haps artists and philosophers of the past did not have the benefit of modern self-consciousness. To realize the subtle yet endemic force of self-interest leads us to a salutary examination of oneself: "Allowing for the probability of one's own interests, one can look for irrational elements in otherwise rational arguments, or for disguised ideological assumptions" (14).

So far, so plausible. But the Speakers in their haste leave me a bit unsatisfied. I wonder why anyone would look into himself for "the irrational elements in otherwise rational arguments." Why bother to uncover the shabby underside of one's "ideological assumptions"? Here, as far as I can judge, is the Speakers' answer:

The current debate about the humanities can itself be seen as emerging from an ideological context since one of the results of the contemporary interest in theory and the critique of the foundations of knowledge in many disciplines has been the realization that all stances in scholarly research, as in the choice of values, imply a prior commitment to some basic belief system. The best contemporary work in the humanities strives to make clear both its critique of the ideologies of previous work, and its own inevitable ideological blind spots.(14)

The argument of the first sentence is circular, winding with devious intent back upon itself. Reduced to essentials it says: "The debate is ideological because theory tells us all 'stances' are ideological." But what concerns me here is not the syntactical legerdemain or the tautology; it is that "prior commitment." Prior to what? Apparently, prior to everything, especially to "scholarly research." The best work simply takes off from the best "belief system." The best workers are best because

they begin as selfcritical beings; they are solicitous of the interests of the dispossessed because of their prior belief system.

I do not mean to insist on the arrant self-righteousness of the Speakers. My point is that, as far as I can tell, the Speakers are confused. They imagine that our "belief systems" or "ideologies" or our interests determine our approach to literature. My experience as a reader and as a man tells me that literature shapes our belief system, forms our ideologies, informs our choice of values. When the Speakers assert, later, that the "best work characteristic of the humanities today has renewed debates on value," that ringing affirmation rings false (14). They mean only that those with a prior concern for the dispossessed — that is, those with the right ideology — know how to read.

In dealing with "Core Curriculum" — what to read in college — the Speakers fairly bring together the many considerations that have opened up the canon and brought about a crisis of authority. (They point out that the authority and the consensus were never there anyway.) These considerations are often but not always of a political or social nature; many diverse interests are demanding a piece of the canon, to the dismay, the Speakers imply, of "Western white males" (16). The ever-widening definition of "text" brings in movies, comic strips, greeting cards, bumper stickers, toilet graffiti, etc.

The Speakers are quite right, I think, in seeing the curriculum debate as a sign of vigor in the humanities. They rightly point out that the chaos comes out of authentic and respectable differences in critical judgment: "most of us carry around... a list of famous writers, artists, historical events. Why not simply require knowledge of them and be done with it? The list is too long and too short — too

long to allow treatment of all, too short to include members of anyone else's list" (17). Under the circumstances, the Speakers convincingly maintain, humanities curricula have changed very slowly and cautiously, and old monuments still dominate the landscape. The debate has not led to impulsive experiments.

In a section on "Teaching" the Speakers take up, among other matters, a question of great import: the relationship of research to teaching. Their position will surprise no one: "teaching and scholarship are properly a continuum" (20). They concede that "in the current academic marketplace scholarship has a higher priority than teaching" (20), but they still maintain that scholarship is a necessary albeit not a sufficient condition of teaching. In support of their position they offer nothing but the testimony of an expert witness, "the President of Georgetown University, Timothy S. Healy, S.J." This expert himself contributes nothing but an assertion: "these two great works stand as cause and effect" (20). (Apparently, scholarship is the cause.)

This is not argument at all. If the Speakers were not in such haste to be done with this report, they might have gone beyond expert opinions and asked some pertinent questions. Are there different kinds of scholarship, some of which is humane and significant, some of which is not? Do the editors of learned journals know the difference and does it matter? Is the scientific model useful for the humanities? In the sciences, hordes of merely competent workers can make real albeit inconspicuous contributions to an enterprise that makes progress. Is that true of the humanities?

And there are still larger questions at issue, which Father Healy unwittingly touches upon: "When a student sees that the professor is the live embodiment of a discipline,

when he understands in class or lab the excitement as well as the stress of discovery . . . this can turn his learning upside down . . ." (20). Isn't it possible to see the "disguised ideological assumption" that the life of the mind — nay, less: the live embodiment of a discipline — is the highest destiny and exactly the ideal to offer the young? Isn't it possible that one of Cheney's expert witnesses, Leon Kass, is closer to the truth when he speaks of "second-order scholarly concerns" displacing "human concerns"? I do not intend to argue here by way of rhetorical question. These are real questions and they ought to trouble us all. The Speakers, in their utter self-assurance, give no sign they have ever considered such questions.

I have reviewed only some of the issues over which the Humanities War is being fought. These issues, I think, are of great consequence. Indeed, my main point throughout this review is that this war is far too important to be left to the generals, for the generals on both sides have woefully let us down. They do not inspire loyalty. As far as I can tell, the generals don't even know the true location of the battlefield. For that piece of vital information we must turn, or return, to Wallace Stevens, per my epigraph.

Anthony Parise

Charles J. Sykes, *ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education*, Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1988.

Mr. Sykes's book, *ProfScam*, as the title implies, is an angry, vitriolic, and outrageous diatribe against the American higher education establishment in general, and professors in particular. The book is sensationalist in