

Rethinking the Humanities

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IN 1990 I SECURED A COMMITMENT from the discretionary fund of the then Dean of Graduate Studies and Associate Vice-President Research at the University of Saskatchewan, Jack Manns. There were three key features of this arrangement for which I gained approval. The Humanities Research Unit I proposed to establish would not be located in a single college but would develop collaborative relations with several. It would report to the Office of the Vice-President Research. And it would be funded from the university's base budget. This arrangement allowed for a strategy of serving the traditional humanities community on campus while creating new collaborative communities on and off campus. Here was a way to advance the disciplinary and transdisciplinary agenda which Canadian universities were beginning to favour and to do so with some intellectual freedom and secure (if modest) resources. This was not the first attempt to "rethink" the humanities, nor has it been easy to keep this project going through various waves of institutional planning, prioritizing, branding, positioning, and forced migration from our long-term space in order to accommodate a Confucius Institute, but the Humanities Research Unit survives and prospers as a source of critique, debate, education, and learning on display and in progress, thanks to the co-direction provided by first Marie

Battiste (Aboriginal Education) and Lynne Bell (Art and Art History) and by a range of supportive colleagues, students, and staff.

From the outset, unit programming emphasized three key themes: threats and impediments, academic value, and decolonizing education. As these themes (and their variations here) attest, humanities work is always pursued on challenging terrain but with intellectual resources predominantly but not exclusively text-based and well fitted to engaging with and illuminating questions of pressing importance for scholars, students, institutions, and citizens. Over the years, the unit has approached each of the events it has solely or co-operatively sponsored as one more moment in a continuous process of remaking and reviewing the case for the humanities in contemporary Canada. And at the heart of this endeavour remains my home discipline of English Studies.

As a disciplinary formation, English uses its compositional or training component and the global status of English as “the” language of science and business to dominate French, Indigenous, and immigrant-heritage languages on campuses across the country where the profitable option is almost always the easiest sell. English still has numbers—of students and faculty—to its advantage relative to its sister disciplines, making for a positive budgetary presence and a sizeable political presence in areas of collegial governance. However, English as the humanities’ champion is also the instrumentalists’ greatest prize, the place into which almost all the humanities can be caused to retreat and gradually forego allegiance to their dark materials. A single omnibus department called Composition and Cultural Studies does not seem much of a stretch once omnibus budgeting arrives from Ottawa at a campus near you, if it is not there already. English represents hope and enhanced endangerment that comes with being one of the last dominoes standing in the current remaking of Canadian postsecondary institutions. How, then, does English live up to its role as a champion of the humanities in hard times, rather than serving as a conduit for further cynical compaction and immiseration of intellectual work? One answer to this question must surely be new forms of solidarity beyond the “narcissism of small differences” (Freud 199; see also Kolstø) and resource wars. And it is such a form of non-homogenizing, performative solidarity that this special issue seeks to model.

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Caveat auctor!

In 1963 in France, in the middle of the theory ferment that has been read both as liberating and as endangering literary studies via the activities of Foucault, Derrida, Cixous, Irigaray, et al., there occurred the Humanist Controversy (*La Querelle de Humanisme*) whose central figure was Louis Althusser. This controversy, like the current special issue of *ESC*, derived from someone bringing people together to address a broad issue with particular political and academic aims. When an invitation was extended by editor Erich Fromm to Althusser to contribute to a collection on *Socialist Humanism*, he accepted reluctantly, only to have his contribution read and then politely rejected. This rebuff in turn inspired Althusser to publish his piece separately and to share the story of its journey into print.

At the heart of this controversy, at least in Althusser's reading of it, lay the reactionary politics of liberal humanism:

I pleaded the conjuncture, and the solemn title [*Socialist Humanism*] under which this much too beautiful international orchestra had been assembled: the only thing that could come of it, I said, was a *Missa Solemnis in Humanism-Major*, and my personal part could only spoil the Universal harmony of the score. But it was to no avail that I made the conversation ring with all the capital letters that Circumstance obliged me to use; to no avail that, out of arguments, I gave him [Fromm] my arguments, called a spade a spade, said, in brief, that my music would not be appreciated. A. [Polish Marxist philosopher, Adam Schaff] sealed my lips with an impeccable syllogism. Every Humanist is a Liberal: Fromm is a Humanist; therefore, Fromm is a Liberal. It followed that I could play my instrument in peace, after my own fashion. I let him coax me about as long as was seemly—to savour the situation, but also because I was plagued by a nagging doubt. I may have been wrong, after all: with a good theory of the displacement of the dominant, which I was trying hard to profess, one could, after all, imagine a Humanist who was also a Liberal, the conjuncture notwithstanding. Everything was a matter of the conjuncture. (“The Humanist Controversy” 223).

The first lesson I take from this sequence of events pertains to editorial over-management as harmful to rethinking of any kind and certainly to the unfinishable business of defining and doing work, including political work, in the name of humanism, the human sciences, or the humanities.

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I have tried, therefore, to be a permissive editor rather than a tyrannical conductor bent on achieving harmony among contributors at any cost. My channeling von Karajan would have been especially inappropriate because of the abilities and commitment of the authors assembled here and because of the strategic value of indeterminacy when the administrative definers and quantifiers of academic “impact” both rule and continuously screw up in the name of managing “crisis” (see, for example, Collini 48–49, and chapters 8 through 10).

The second lesson I draw from Althusser’s account of authorial rejection and circumvention is that international efforts at inclusion and representation are neither more nor less instructive than national ones and that configuration or characterization of the international and the national can and should be read as both affirmative and problematic, whether pursued in the name and traditions of international socialism or of the Social Sciences and Humanities within SSHRC, the division between Academy One (Arts and Humanities) and Academy Two (Social Sciences) of the Royal Society of Canada, or collegial divisions between and within colleges and schools across Canadian postsecondary institutions. Neither internationally nor across Canada can the humanities be organized in ways free from complacent or timorous traditionalism, opportunistic kinds of “pragmatic grouping” (Coillini 63), and the *Anschluss* of the neoliberal arts. In this site of contestation, purists are doomed to defeat—or invulnerable in their atypical privilege. Aggrieved or imperturbable essentializing about the nature of the human as the heart of the humanities needs to be given up for more robust forms of conjunctural rethinking and good impurity. There is no formation without deformation, as many of us have learned over the past three decades. Closing ranks across compatible disciplines must hence be accompanied by our continuing, and insufficiently recognized, opening up to difference, so that the possibility of dialectical humanism redeems contradiction from the fraudulence and hypocrisy of academic capitalism and its latest jingle, disciplinary Darwinism in the form of “program prioritization” (Bradshaw).

The third lesson I draw is that *rethinking* constitutes the field rather than temporarily unsettling it before the next orthodoxy or consensus arrives. The notion of continuous self-resettlement interacting with externally induced unsettlement, like the ritualizing of crisis as constitutive rather than aberrant, seems to be borne out in Canada in particularly revealing ways. For Eric Cazdyn, for example, in his gripping account of his move from the United States to Canada, the *rethinking* of revolution beyond the unthinkable and the trivial (6) is intimately connected to the

rethinking of humanistic work “beyond the false binary of close reading and sociopolitical analysis” (72–73). Retaining the distinctiveness of the aesthetic, as its dynamic non-identity with the political, opens up the complementary notions of revolution and cure, possibilities that may invigorate labouring bodies of all sorts, including those most directly connected and contributing to bodies of knowledge. The aesthetic, the literary, the imaginative—these humanistic staples remain instrumental primarily and productively as sites of resistance to the dominant instrumentalities currently rebranding Canada not as a *Missa solennis* but an 1812 *Overture Canadensis*.

“Tired and Entitled” or #idlenomore?

At a recent meeting in the series “Dean on Demand,” the Department of English at the University of Saskatchewan received from our current Dean a very helpful account of the budgetary and communicative challenges facing the College of Arts and Sciences which he oversees. This account took up more than ninety minutes of a two-hour meeting, and the message was strong on compliance with alleged realities and allegedly irresistible trends and consistent in its emphasis on “opportunities,” even where our group of literary scholars seemed mostly to perceive threats and ill omens for our values and understanding of best educational and research practices. The Dean was genial, even when subjected to accusations of administrative bloat in his own shop. However, when invited to articulate a program of resistance alongside one of compliance he failed to do so. Instead, he tried to buttress his discourse of challenge and opportunity—in his terms, to move instruction online or off to a provincial feeder system while promoting teaching-only appointments as a way of preserving faculty complement while throwing a lifeline of sorts to a few of our substantial cohort of sessional and contingent faculty.

But what struck several of us most forcibly in these exchanges, and what the Dean took particular pains to emphasize, was an apparent image problem conveyed to him by one of the high-price consultants who travel around Canadian colleges and universities like circuit court judges delivering judgments on those who are claimed to be on trial for serious offences, with the evidence against them massive and seemingly incontrovertible. The offences in question are expensiveness in an age of austerity; resistance to change (explained and enforced as a return to profitability); and a fondness for disloyalty and critique. The terms of the charge laid against the University of Saskatchewan and its sister institutions across the country is

that they, meaning their academic staff, are “tired and entitled”: plumb out of ideas yet as committed as ever to their guild privileges. The consultant’s indictment had clearly made an impression on our Dean, and this was compounded for him by the fact that, comprising as it does half the university in terms of faculty complement and student numbers, the College of Arts and Science must be onside for institutional goals to be achievable but remains free from the tough love of accreditation bodies. The problem, as it is seen in some quarters, is that in arts and science we remain basically self-governing and hence ungovernable from above or from the outside. As a result, apparently, we are the intransigent cohort most deserving of the doublet “tired and entitled.” In this situation, according to our Dean, we need to embrace “innovation” to avert the wrath of the instrumentalists in charge of branding, marketing, and concocting and interpreting the metrics of integrated planning. We need to use our residual autonomy to develop new arguments for responsiveness and creative compliance with the ways things are or are destined to become, this instead of reiterating the tired old appeal to “teaching critical thinking” in situations of physical proximity and Socratic exchange where plenary values become unmarketable opacity and signification beyond consignment.

This is the rocky road from the liberal arts to the neoliberal arts, the path down which we are being urged to proceed by most people in administrative positions outside academic departments and schools and those whose advice they commission and heed. Critical thinking as a key component of economic agency and engaged citizenship no longer cuts it with those whose opinions and decisions about funding affect us all. However, this advice to knuckle under and get with the new program exemplifies two presumptions that are instantly and seriously vulnerable. One involves knowledge of what it means to be a member of the academic staff of a Canadian postsecondary institution today. The use of the term “tired” in this context means to most of us the naming of our exhaustion resulting from recurrent or chronic overextension. We are often too tired to act upon our new ideas for teaching, research, and community service. If we are tired it is not of innovation but of meeting incessant demands relating to work conditions, not least the burgeoning regulation and reporting demands directly driven by that administrative bloat I mentioned earlier. “Tired?” Maybe. Tired of overwork and underappreciation by institutional positioners? Probably. Sick and tired of being hectored by those who should be defending us? Absolutely!

And what about the problem of our being “entitled” as well as “tired”? From headhunters to consultants to institutional branders, the chorus

of quislings and know-nothings is growing daily. Every time *On Campus News* appears at the University of Saskatchewan, there are further announcements of appointments claimed to make teacher-scholars' lives easier but in reality adding new levels of noise and needless accountability to lives already stressed to the limit. Redistribution of resources from teaching and research to administration has been termed by Benjamin Ginsberg (2011) "the fall of the faculty," while the social stratification and court culture which accompany this administrative turn have been hilariously recorded by Gaye Tuchman in *Wannabe U.* (You will never look at a campus canapé the same way again after reading her book.) But academic entitlement is just another name for academic freedom and tenure, without which the resultant academic prekariat can be swiftly and thoroughly brought to heel. The tenured professoriate set a bad example, whether as solitary tribunes or as savvy organizers of academic staff. They take their degrees as seriously as they take their responsibility to teach and to prepare the next generation of professors. And the humanists are the worst of all, bristling as they are with capacities for which there is allegedly little demand and which attract considerable derision and hostility from the current keepers of the public and corporate purses.

The attempt to rethink the humanities is a "New Bright Idea," but only in the resolute but thoroughly ironized sense captured by Cecily Devereux's wonderful photograph gracing the cover of this issue of *ESC*. The endless material, cultural, cognitive, and philosophical ambiguities of this piece are not diminished by "seeing" the "original" on the wall of a restaurant in Old Montreal. They are merely resituated, and the work of appreciation and interpretation continues, not without consequences but reassuringly without closure. Novelty and serial numbers, uniqueness and mass production, registration and anonymity, function and decoration, clay and iron, the monumental and the infinitely adaptable, interact so as to encourage and reward endless rethinking and the actions such rethinking prompts. The image is fixed yet constantly in unpredictable motion, just like the products of cultural and imaginative work and just like participants in the #idlenomore movement. The political valency of the hashtag is a new bright idea, pushing tiredness into even more explicit negativity while pushing Aboriginal title into a new ethical space freshly gendered and intergenerational. Meanwhile, as Chief Spence continues her hunger strike, the honour of the Crown is breached by an absent Governor General while the Prime Minister of Canada prefers to an unspinnable encounter on Victoria Island in the Ottawa River a game of cribbage with white seniors in Calgary. How humane is that, and what do we do beyond

denouncing it? We reflect, we teach, we share more broadly: not tired and entitled but inspired and embattled. Read on.

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