

# DEHUMANIZED

When math and science rule the school

By Mark Slouka

**M**any years ago, my fiancée attempted to lend me a bit of respectability by introducing me to my would-be mother-in-law as a future Ph.D. in literature. From Columbia, I added, polishing the apple of my prospects. She wasn't buying it. "A doctor of philosophy," she said. "What're you going to do, open a philosophy store?"

A spear is a spear—it doesn't have to be original. Unable to come up with a quick response and unwilling to petition for a change of venue, I ducked into low-grade irony. More like a stand, I said. I was thinking of stocking Kafka quotes for the holidays, lines from Yeats for a buck-fifty.

And that was that. I married the girl anyway. It's only now, recalling our exchange, that I can appreciate the significance—the poetry, really—of our little *pas de deux*. What we unconsciously acted out, in compressed, almost haiku-like form (*A philosophy store?/I will have a stand/sell pieces of Auden at two bits a beat*), was the essential drama of American education today.

It's a play I've been following for some time now. It's about the increasing dominance—scratch that, the unqualified triumph—of a certain way of seeing, of reckoning value. It's about the victory of whatever can be quantified over everything that can't. It's about the quiet retooling of American education into an adjunct of business, an instrument of production.

The play's almost over. I don't think it's a comedy.

## STATE OF THE UNION

*Then there's amortization,  
the deadliest of all;  
amortization  
of the heart and soul.*

—Vladimir Mayakovsky

**D**espite the determinisms of the day, despite the code-breakers, the wetware specialists, the patient unwinders of the barbed wire of our being, this I feel is true: That we are more nurture than nature; that what we are taught, generally speaking, is what we become; that torturers are made slowly, not minted in the womb. As are those who resist them. I believe that what rules us is less the material world of goods and services than the immaterial one of whims, assumptions, delusions, and lies; that only by studying this world can we hope to shape how it shapes us; that only by attempting to understand what used to be called, in a less embarrassed age, "the human condition" can we hope to make our condition more human, not less.

All of which puts me, and those in the humanities generally, at something of a disadvantage these days. In a visible world, the invisible does not compute; in a corporate culture, hypnotized by quarterly results and profit margins, the gradual sifting of political sentiment is of no value; in a horizontal world of "information" readily convertible to product, the verticality of

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wisdom has no place. Show me the spreadsheet on skepticism.

You have to admire the skill with which we've been outmaneuvered; there's something almost chess-like in the way the other side has narrowed the field, neutralized lines of attack, co-opted the terms of battle. It's all about them now; every move we make plays into their hands, confirms their values. Like the narrator in Mayakovsky's "Conversation with a Tax Collector About Poetry," we're being forced to account for ourselves in the other's idiom, to argue for "the place of the poet/in the workers' ranks." It's not working.

**W**hat is taught, at any given time, in any culture, is an expression of what that culture considers important. That much seems undebatable. How "the culture" decides, precisely, on what matters, how openly the debate unfolds—who frames the terms, declares a winner, and signs the check—well, that's a different matter. Real debate can be short-circuited by orthodoxy, and whether that orthodoxy is enforced through the barrel of a gun or backed by the power of unexamined assumption, the effect is the same.

In our time, orthodoxy is economic. Popular culture fetishizes it, our entertainments salaam to it (how many millions for sinking that putt, accepting that trade?), our artists are ranked by and revered for it. There is no institution wholly apart. Everything submits; everything must, sooner or later, pay fealty to the market; thus cost-benefit analyses on raising children, on cancer medications, on clean water, on the survival of species, including—in the last, last analysis—our own. If humanity has suffered under a more impoverishing delusion, I'm not aware of it.

That education policy reflects the zeitgeist shouldn't surprise us; capitalism has a wonderful knack for marginalizing (or co-opting) systems of value that might pose an alternative to its own. Still, capitalism's success in this case is particularly elegant: by bringing education to heel, by forcing it to meet its criteria for "success," the market is well on the way to controlling a majority share of the one business that might offer a

competing product, that might question its assumptions. It's a neat trick. The problem, of course, is that by its success we are made vulnerable. By downsizing what is most dangerous (and most essential) about our education, namely the deep civic function of the arts and the humanities, we're well on the way to producing a nation of employees, not citizens. Thus is the world made safe for commerce, but not safe.

We're pounding swords into cogs. They work in Pyongyang too.

#### CAPITAL INVESTMENT

*This is exactly what life is about. You get a paycheck every two weeks. We're preparing children for life.*

—District of Columbia

Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee

**T**he questions are straightforward enough: What do we teach, and why? One might assume



that in an aspiring democracy like ours the answers would be equally straightforward: We teach whatever contributes to the development of autonomous human beings; we teach, that is, in order to expand the census of knowledgeable, reasoning, independent-minded individuals both

sufficiently familiar with the world outside themselves to lend their judgments compassion and breadth (and thereby contribute to the political life of the nation), and sufficiently skilled to find productive employment. In that order. Our primary function, in other words, is to teach people, not tasks; to participate in the complex and infinitely worthwhile labor of forming citizens, men and women capable of furthering what's



best about us and forestalling what's worst. It is only secondarily—one might say incidentally—about producing workers.

I'm joking, of course. Education in America today is almost exclusively about the GDP. It's about investing in our human capital, and please note what's modifying what. It's about ensuring that the United States does not fall from its privileged perch in the global economy. And what of our political perch, you ask, whether legitimate or no? Thank you for your question. Management has decided that the new business plan has no room for frivolity. Those who can justify their presence in accordance with its terms may remain;

the rest will be downsized or discontinued. Alternatively, since studies have suggested that humanizing the workspace may increase efficiency, a few may be kept on, the curricular equivalent of potted plants.

If facetiousness is an expression of frustration, it does not necessarily follow that the picture it paints is false. The force of the new dispensation is stunning. Its language is the language of banking—literal, technocratic, wincingly bourgeois; its effects are visible, quite literally, everywhere you look.

Start with the newspaper of record. In an article by *New York Times* editorialist Brent Staples, we learn that the American education system is failing “to produce the fluent writers required by the new economy.” No doubt it is, but the sin of omission here is both telling and representative. Might there be another reason for seeking to develop fluent writers? Could clear writing have some relation to clear thinking and thereby have, perhaps, some political efficacy? If so, neither Staples nor his readers, writing in to the *Times*, think to mention it. Writing is “a critical strategy that we can offer students to prepare them to succeed in the workplace.” Writing skills are vital because they promote “clear, concise communications, which all business people want to read.” “The return on a modest investment in writing is manifold,” because “it strengthens competitiveness, increases efficiency and empowers employees.” And so on, without exception. The chairman of the country's largest association of college writing professors agrees. The real problem, he explains, is the SAT writing exam, which “hardly resembles the kinds of writing people encounter in business or academic settings.” An accountant, he argues, needs to write “about content related to the company and the work in which she's steeped.” It's unlikely that she'll “need to drop everything and give the boss 25 minutes on the Peloponnesian War or her most meaningful quotation.”

What's depressing here is that this is precisely the argument heard at parent-teacher meetings across the land. When is the boss ever going to ask my Johnny about the Peloponnesian War? As if Johnny had agreed to have no existence outside his cubicle of choice. As if he wasn't going to inherit the holy right of gun ownership and the power of the vote.

At times, the failure of decent, intelligent, reliably humane voices like Staples's to see the political forest for the economic trees is breathtaking. In a generally well-intentioned editorial, Staples's colleague at the *Times*, Nicholas Kristof,

argues that we can't "address poverty or grow the economy" unless we do something about the failure of our schools. So far, so good, though one might quibble that addressing poverty and growing the economy are not the same thing.

But never mind, because the real significance of the failure of our schools is soon made manifest. "Where will the workers come from," Kristof worries, "unless students reliably learn science and math?" If our students "only did as well as those in several Asian countries in math and science, our economy would grow 20 percent faster." The problem, though, is that although our school system was once the envy of all (a "first-rate education," we understand by this point, is one that grows the economy), now only our white suburban schools are "comparable to those in Singapore, which may have the best education system in the world."

Ah, Singapore. You'll hear a good deal about Singapore if you listen to the chorus of concern over American education. If only we could be more like Singapore. If only our education system could be as efficient as Singapore's. You say that Singapore might not be the best model to aspire to, that in certain respects it more closely resembles Winston Smith's world than Thomas Jefferson's? What does that have to do with education?

And the beat goes on. Still another *Times* editorialist, Thomas Friedman, begins a column on the desperate state of American education by quoting Bill Gates. Gates, Friedman informs us, gave a "remarkable speech" in which he declared that "American high schools are obsolete." This is bad, Friedman says. Bill Gates is telling us that our high schools, "even when they are working exactly as designed—cannot teach our kids what they need to know today."

What *do* our kids need to know today? As far as Friedman is concerned, whatever will get them hired by Bill Gates. "Let me translate Mr. Gates's words," he writes. What Mr. Gates is saying is: "If we don't fix American education, I will not be able to hire your kids." Really worried now, Friedman goes to talk to Lawrence Summers, who explains that "for the first time in our history," we're facing "competition from low-wage, high-human-capital communities, embedded within India, China and Asia." The race is on. In order to thrive, Summers says, we will "have to make sure that many more Americans can get as far ahead as their potential will take them," and quickly, because India and China are coming up on the inside. It's "not just about current capabilities," Friedman concludes, by this point quoting the authors of *The Only Sustainable Edge*, "it's about the relative pace and trajectories of capability-building."

Sustainable edges. Returns on capital investment. Trajectories of capability-building. What's interesting here is that everyone speaks the same

language, everyone agrees on the meaning of the terms. There's a certain country-club quality to it. We're all members. We understand one another. We understand that the capabilities we should be developing are the capabilities that will "get us ahead." We understand that Bill Gates is a logical person to talk to about education because billionaire capitalists generally know something about running a successful business, and American education is a business whose products (like General Motors', say), are substandard, while Singapore's are kicking ass. We understand that getting ahead of low-wage, high-human-capital communities will allow us "to thrive."

Unlike most country clubs, alas, this one is anything but exclusive; getting far enough beyond its gates to ask whether that last verb might have another meaning can be difficult. Success means success. To thrive means

to thrive. The definitions of "investment," "accountability," "value," "utility" are fixed and immutable; they are what they are. Once you've got that down, everything is easy: According to David Brooks (bringing up the back of my *Times* parade), all we need to do is make a modest investment in "delayed gratification skills." Young people who can delay gratification can "master the sort of self-control that leads to success"; they "can sit through sometimes boring classes" and "perform rote tasks." As a result, they tend to "get higher SAT scores," gain acceptance to better colleges, and have, "on average, better adult outcomes."<sup>1</sup>

A little of this can go a long way, and there's a lot of it to be had. When it comes to education in America, with very few exceptions, this is the conversation and these are its terms. From the local PTA meeting to the latest Presidential Commission on Education, the only subject under discussion, the only real criterion for investment—in short, the alpha and omega of educational policy—is jobs. Is it any wonder, then, that our educational priorities should be determined by business leaders, or that the relationship between industry and education should

<sup>1</sup> *There's something almost sublime about this level of foolishness. By giving his argument a measured, mathematical air (the students only achieve better adult outcomes "on average"), Brooks hopes that we will overlook both the fact that his constant (success) is a variable and that his terms are way unequal, as the kids might say. One is reminded of the scene in the movie Proof in which the mathematician played by Anthony Hopkins, sliding into madness, begins a proof with "Let X equal the cold." Let higher SAT scores equal better adult outcomes.*

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increasingly resemble the relationship between a company and its suppliers, or that the “suppliers” across the land, in order to make payroll, should seek to please management in any way possible, to demonstrate the viability of their product?

Consider the ritual of addressing our periodic “crises in education.” Typically, the call to arms comes from the business community. We’re losing our competitive edge, sounds the cry. Singapore is pulling ahead. The president swings into action. He orders up a blue-chip commission of high-ranking business executives (the 2006 Commission on the Future of Higher Education, led by business executive Charles Miller, for example) to study the problem and come up with “real world” solutions.

Thus empowered, the commission crunches the numbers, notes the depths to which we’ve sunk, and emerges into the light to underscore the need for more accountability. To whom? Well, to busi-

ness, naturally. To whom else would you account? And that’s it, more or less. Cue the curtain. The commission’s president answers all reasonable questions. Eventually, everyone

goes home and gets with the program.

It can be touching to watch supporters of the arts contorting themselves to fit. In a brochure produced by The Education Commission of the States, titled “The Arts, Education and the Creative Economy,” we learn that supporting the arts in our schools is a good idea because “state and local leaders are realizing that the arts and culture are vital to economic development.” In fact, everyone is realizing it. Several states “have developed initiatives that address the connections between economic growth and the arts and culture.” The New England states have formed “the Creative Economy Council . . . a partnership among business, government and cultural leaders.” It seems that “a new economy has emerged . . . driven by ideas, information technology and globalization” (by this point, the role of painting, say, is getting a bit murky), and that “for companies and organizations to remain competitive and cutting edge, they must attract and retain individuals who can think creatively.”

You can almost see the air creeping back into the balloon: We can do this! We can make the case to management! We can explain, as Mike Huckabee does, that trimming back funding for the arts would be shortsighted because “experts and futurists warn that the future economy will be driven by the ‘creative class.’” We can cite “numerous studies” affirming that “a student schooled in music improves his or her SAT and ACT scores in math,” and that “creative stu-

dents are better problem solvers . . . a trait the business world begs for in its workforce.”

They’ll see we have some value after all. They’ll let us stay.

**T**o show that they, too, get it, that like Cool Hand Luke they’ve “got their mind right,” our colleges and universities smile and sway with the rest. In “A Statement by Public Higher Education Leaders Convened by Carnegie Corporation of New York”—to pick just one grain from a sandbox of evidence—we learn that our institutions of higher learning are valuable because they can “help revitalize our nation’s economy and educate and train the next generations of Americans to meet the challenges of global competition.” Both the tune and the lyrics should be familiar by now. “The present economic crisis requires an investment in human capital.” And where better to invest than in our colleges and universities, whose innovative researchers “invented the technologies that have fueled economic progress and enhanced America’s economic competitiveness.” The statement’s undersigned, representing colleges and universities from California to New Hampshire, conclude with a declaration of faith: “Leaders of the country’s public higher education sector are committed to create a long-term plan *to serve the nation by enhancing public universities’ critical role in creating jobs*, increasing graduates, enhancing the quality and skills of the workforce, and assisting in national technology and energy initiatives through research.”

Think of my italics above as a hand going up in the back of the audience. Could there exist, buried under our assumptions, another system of value? Could our colleges and universities have another, truly “critical role,” which they ignore at our peril? A role that might “serve the nation” as well?

#### THE CASE FOR THE HUMANITIES

*Only the educated are free.*

—Epictetus

**R**ain does not follow the plow. Political freedom, whatever the market evangelists may tell us, is not an automatic by-product of a growing economy; democratic institutions do not spring up, like flowers at the feet of the magi, in the tire tracks of commerce. They just don’t. They’re a different species. They require a different kind of tending.

The case for the humanities is not hard to make, though it can be difficult—to such an extent have we been marginalized, so long have we acceded to that marginalization—not to sound either defensive or naive. The humanities, done

### POLITICAL FREEDOM, WHATEVER THE MARKET EVANGELISTS MAY TELL US, IS NOT AN AUTOMATIC BY- PRODUCT OF A GROWING ECONOMY

right, are the crucible within which our evolving notions of what it means to be fully human are put to the test; they teach us, incrementally, endlessly, not what to do but how to be. Their method is confrontational, their domain unlimited, their “product” not truth but the reasoned search for truth, their “success” something very much like Frost’s momentary stay against confusion.

They are thus, inescapably, political. Why? Because they complicate our vision, pull our most cherished notions out by the roots, flay our pieties. Because they grow uncertainty. Because they expand the reach of our understanding (and therefore our compassion), even as they force us to draw and redraw the borders of tolerance. Because out of all this work of self-building might emerge an individual capable of humility in the face of complexity; an individual formed through questioning and therefore unlikely to cede that right; an individual resistant to coercion, to manipulation and demagoguery in all their forms. The humanities, in short, are a superb delivery mechanism for what we might call democratic values. There is no better that I am aware of.

This, I would submit, is value—and cheap at the price. This is utility of a higher order. Considering where the rising arcs of our ignorance and our deference lead, what could represent a better investment? Given our fondness for slogans, our childlike susceptibility to bullying and rant, our impatience with both evidence and ambiguity, what could earn us, over time, a better rate of return?

**L**ike a single species taking over an ecosystem, like an elephant on a see-saw, the problem today is disequilibrium. Why is every Crisis in American Education cast as an economic threat and never a civic one? In part, because we don’t have the language for it. Our focus is on the usual economic indicators. There are no corresponding “civic indicators,” no generally agreed-upon warning signs of political vulnerability, even though the inability of more than two thirds of our college graduates to read a text and draw rational inferences could be seen as the political equivalent of runaway inflation or soaring unemployment.

If we lack the language, and therefore the awareness, to right the imbalance between the vocational and the civic, if education in America—despite the heroic efforts of individual

teachers—is no longer in the business of producing the kinds of citizens necessary to the survival of a democratic society, it’s in large part because the time-honored civic function of our educational system has been ground up by the ideological mills of both the right and the left into a radioactive paste called values education and declared off-limits. Consider the irony. Worried about indoctrination, we’ve short-circuited argument. Fearful of propaganda, we’ve taken away the only tools that could detect and counter it. “Values” are now the province of the home. And the church. How convenient for the man.



How does one “do” the humanities value-free? How does one teach history, say, without grappling with what that long parade of genius and folly suggests to us? How does one teach literature other than as an invitation, a challenge, a gauntlet—a force fully capable of altering not only what we believe but how we see? The answer is, of course, that one doesn’t. One teaches some toothless, formalized version of these things, careful not to upset anyone, despite the fact that upsetting people is arguably the very purpose of the arts and perhaps of the humanities in general.

Even a dessicated, values-free version of the humanities has the potential to be dangerous, though, because it is impossible to say where the individual mind might wander off to while reading, what unsettling associations might suggest

themselves, what unscripted, unapproved questions might float to the surface. It's been said before: in the margins of the page, over the course of time, for the simple reason that we shape every book we read and are slightly shaped by it in turn, we become who we are. Which is to say individuals just distinct enough from one another in our orientation toward "the truth" or "the good" to be difficult to control.

This "deep" civic function of the humanities, not easily reducible to the politics of left or right but politically combustible nonetheless, is something understood very well by totalitarian societies, which tend to keep close tabs on them, and to circumscribe them in direct proportion to how stringently the population is controlled. This should neither surprise nor comfort us. Why would a repressive regime support a force superbly designed to resist it? Rein in the humanities effectively enough—whether through active repression, fiscal starvation, or linguistic marginalization—and you create a space, an opportunity. Dogma adores a vacuum.

#### MATHANDSCIENCE

*Nobody was ever sent to prison for espousing the wrong value for the Hubble constant.*

—Dennis Overbye

Nothing speaks more clearly to the relentlessly vocational bent in American education than its long-running affair with math and science. I say "affair" because I am kind; in truth, the relationship is obsessive, exclusionary, altogether unhealthy. Whatever the question, math and science (so often are they spoken of in the same breath, they've begun to feel singular) are, or is, the answer. They make sense; they compute. They're everything we want: a solid return on capital investment, a proven route to "success." Everything else can go fish.

Do we detect a note of bitterness, a hint of jealousy? No doubt. There's something indecent about the way math and science gobble up market share. Not content with being heavily subsidized by both government and private industry and with serving as a revenue-generating gold mine for higher education (which pockets the profits from any patents and passes on research expenses to students through tuition increases—effectively a kind of hidden "science tax"), math and science are now well on the way to becoming the default choice for anyone having trouble deciding where to park his (or the taxpayers') money, anyone trying to burnish his no-nonsense educational bona fides, or, most galling, anyone looking for a way to demonstrate his or her civic pride.

But let me be clear: I write this not to provide

tinder to our latter-day inquisitors, ever eager to sacrifice the spirit of scientific inquiry in the name of some new misapprehension. That said, I see no contradiction between my respect for science and my humanist's discomfort with its ever-greater role in American culture, its ever-burgeoning coffers, its often dramatically anti-democratic ways, its symbiotic relationship with government, with industry, with our increasingly corporate institutions of higher learning. Triply protected from criticism by the firewall of their jargon (which immediately excludes the non-specialist and assures a jury of motivated and sympathetic peers), their economic efficacy, and the immunity conferred by conveniently associated terms like "progress" and "advancement," the sciences march, largely untouched, under the banner of the inherently good.<sup>2</sup> And this troubles me.

It troubles me because there are many things "math and science" do well, and some they don't. And one of the things they don't do well is democracy. They have no aptitude for it, no connection to it, really. Which hasn't prevented some in the sciences from arguing precisely the opposite, from assuming even this last, most ill-fitting mantle, by suggesting that science's spirit of questioning will automatically infect the rest of society.

In fact, it's not so. Science, by and large, keeps to its reservation, which explains why scientists tend to get in trouble only when they step outside the lab.<sup>3</sup> That no one has ever been sent to prison for espousing the wrong value for the Hubble constant is precisely to the point. The work of democracy involves espousing those values that in a less democratic society *would* get one sent to prison. To maintain its "sustainable edge," a democracy requires its citizens to actually risk something, to test the limits of the acceptable; the "trajectory of capability-building" they must devote themselves to, above all others, is the one that advances the capability for making trouble. If the value you're espousing is one that could never get anyone, anywhere, sent to prison, then strictly democratically speaking you're useless.

All of this helps explain why, in today's repressive societies, the sciences do not come in for the same treatment as the humanities. Not only are the sciences, with a few notable exceptions, politically neutral; their specialized languages tend to segregate them from the wider population, making ideological contagion difficult. More importantly, their work, quite often, is translatable into "product," which any aspiring dictator-

<sup>2</sup> Despite the "debates" surrounding issues like evolution, climate change, and stem-cell research, science continues to enjoy almost unimaginable fiscal and cultural advantages.

<sup>3</sup> Andrei Sakharov leaps to mind, though of course the roster of genuinely courageous, politically involved scientists is extensive.

ship recognizes as an unambiguous good, whereas the work of the humanities almost never is.

To put it simply, science addresses the outer world; the humanities, the inner one. Science explains how the material world is now for *all* men; the humanities, in their indirect, slippery way, offer the raw materials from which the individual constructs a self—a self *distinct* from others. The sciences, to push the point a bit, produce people who study things, and who can therefore, presumably, make or fix or improve these things. The humanities don't.

One might, then, reasonably expect the two, each invaluable in its own right, to operate on an equal footing in the United States, to receive equal attention and respect. Not so. In fact, not even close. From the Sputnik-inspired emphasis on “science and math” to the pronouncements of our recently retired “Education President” (the jury is still out on Obama), the call is always for more investment in “math and science.” And then a little more. The “American Competitiveness Initiative” calls for doubling federal spending on basic research grants in the physical sciences over ten years, at a cost of \$50 billion. The federal government is asked to pay the cost of finding 30,000 new math and science teachers. Senator Bill Frist pushes for grants for students majoring in math and science.

Whether the bias trickles down or percolates up, it's systemic. The New York City Department of Education announces housing incentives worth up to \$15,000 to lure teachers “in math and science” to the city's schools. Classes in history and art and foreign languages are cut back to make room for their more practical, “rigorous” cousins. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute announces its selection of twenty new professors who will use their million-dollar grants to develop fresh approaches to teaching science. Nothing remotely comparable exists in the humanities.

Popular culture, meanwhile, plays backup, cementing bias into cliché. Mathandscience becomes the all-purpose shorthand for intelligence; it has that all-American aura of money about it. The tax collector, to recall Mayakovsky, runs the show.

#### STATE OF PLAY

*We want our students to take into their interactions with others, into their readings, into their private thoughts, depth of experience and a willingness to be wrong. Only a study of the humanities provides that.*

—Marcus Eure

English teacher, Brewster High School

No assessment of the marginalized role

of the humanities today is possible without first admitting the complicity of those in the fold. Outmanned, out-funded, perpetually on the defensive, we've adapted to the hostile environment by embracing a number of survival strategies, among them camouflage, mimicry, and—altogether too believably—playing dead. None of these is a strategy for success.

Which is not to say that the performance is without interest. Happily ignoring the fact that the whole point of reading is to force us into an encounter with the other, our high schools and colleges labor mightily to provide students with mirrors of their own experience, lest they be made uncomfortable, effectively undercutting diversity in the name of diversity. Some may actually believe in this. The rest, unable or unwilling to make the hard argument to parents and administrators, bend to the prevailing winds, shaping their curricula to appeal to the greatest number, a strategy suitable to advertising, not teaching.

Since it's not just the material itself but what's done with it that can lead to trouble (even the most staid “classic,” subjected to the right pressures by the right teacher, can yield its measure of discomfort), how we teach must be adjusted as well. Thus we encourage anemic discussions about Atticus Finch and racism but race past the bogeyman of miscegenation; thus we debate the legacy of the founders but tactfully sidestep their issues with Christianity; thus we teach *Walden*, if we teach it at all, as an ode to Nature and ignore its full-frontal assault on the tenets of capitalism. Thus we tiptoe through the minefield, leaving the mines intact and loaded.

Still, the evasions and capitulations made by those on the secondary-school level are nothing compared with the tactics of their university counterparts, who, in a pathetic attempt to ape their more successful colleagues in the sciences, have developed over time their own faux-scientific, isolating jargon, robbing themselves of their greatest virtue, their ability to influence (or infect) the general population. Verily, self-erasure is rarely this effective, or ironic. Not content with trivializing itself through the subjects it considers important, nor with having assured its irrelevance by making itself unintelligible, the study of literature, for example, has taken its birthright and turned it into a fetish; that is, adopted the word “politics”—God, the irony!—and cycled it through so many levels of metaphorical in-

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terpretation that nothing recognizable remains except the husk. Politically neuter, we now sing the politics of ocularcentric rhetoric. Safe in our tenured nests, we risk neither harm nor good.

If the self-portrait is unflattering, I can't apologize. Look at us! Look at how we've let the fashion for economic utility intimidate us, how we simultaneously cringe and justify ourselves, how we secretly despise the philistines, who could never understand the relevance of our theoretical flea circus, even as we rush, in a paroxysm of class guilt, to offer classes in Introductory Sit-Com Writing, in Clown 500, in *Seinfeld*; classes in which "everyone is a winner." Small wonder the sciences don't respect us; we shouldn't respect us.

And what have we gained from all this? Alas, despite our eagerness to fit in, to play ball, we *still* don't belong, we're still ignored or infantilized. What we've earned is the prerogative of going out with a whimper. Marginalized, self-righteous, we just keep on keeping on, insulted that no one returns our calls, secretly expecting no less.

**W**hich makes it all the more impressive that there remain individuals who stubbornly hold the line, who either haven't noticed or don't care what's happened to the humanities in America, who daily fight for relevance and achieve it. Editors, journalists, university and foundation presidents, college and high school teachers, they neither apologize nor equivocate nor retreat a single inch. Seen rightly, what could be more in the American grain?

Let the few stand for the many. Historian Drew Faust seems determined to use her bully pulpit as president of Harvard to call attention to the distorting force of our vocational obsession. Don Randel, president of the Mellon Foundation, the single largest supporter of the humanities in America, speaks of the humanities' unparalleled ability to force us into "a rigorous cross-examination of our myths about ourselves." Poet, classicist, and former dean of humanities at the University of Chicago Danielle Allen patiently advances the argument that the work of the humanities doesn't reveal itself within the typical three- or five-year cycle, that the humanities work on a fifty-year cycle, a hundred-year cycle.

Public high school English teacher Marcus Eure, meanwhile, teaching in the single most conservative county in New York State, labors daily "to dislocate the complacent mind," to teach students to parse not only what they are being told but how they are being told. His course in rhetoric—enough to give a foolish man

hope—exposes the discrete parts of effective writing and reading, then nudges students to redefine their notion of "correct" to mean precise, logical, nuanced, and inclusive. His unit on lying asks students to read the "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" letter from *The Sun* and Stephanie Ericsson's "The Ways We Lie," then consider how we define lying, whether we condone it under certain circumstances, how we learn to do it. "Having to treat Santa Claus as a systemic lie," Eure notes, "even if we can argue for its necessity, troubles a lot of them."

As does, deliberately, Eure's unit on torture, which uses Michael Levin's "The Case for Torture" to complicate the "us versus them" argument, then asks students to consider Stephen King's "Why We Crave Horror Movies" and David Edelstein's article on "torture porn," "Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex." Inevitably, the question of morality comes up, as does the line between catharsis and desensitization. Eure allows the conversation to twist and complicate itself, to cut a channel to a video game called *The Sims*, which many of the students have played and in which most of them have casually killed the simulated human beings whose world they controlled. The students argue about what it means to watch a movie like *Saw*, what it means to live in a society that produces, markets, and supports such products.

Challenged to defend the utility of his classes, Eure asks his questioner to describe an American life in which the skills he is trying to inculcate are unnecessary. Invariably, he says, it becomes obvious that there is no such life, that *every* aspect of life—every marriage, every job, every parent-teacher meeting—hinges in some way on the ability to understand and empathize with others, to challenge one's beliefs, to strive for reason and clarity.

**M**uzzle the trumpets, still the drums. The market for reason is slipping fast. The currency of ignorance and demagoguery is daily gathering strength. The billboards in the Panhandle proclaim GOD, GUNS AND GUTS MADE AMERICA FREE. Today, the Marcus Eures of America resemble nothing so much as an island ecosystem, surrounded by the times. *Like* that ecosystem, they are difficult, unamenable, and necessary, and, also like that ecosystem, their full value may not be fully understood until they've disappeared, forcing us into a bankruptcy none of us wish to contemplate.

Perhaps there's still time to reinstate the qualifier to its glory, to invest our capital in what makes us human. ■