THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
The Chronicle Review

November 23, 2001

The Near Enemy of the Humanities Is Professionalism

By LISA RUDDICK

Since September 11, many scholars have discovered that the challenge of meeting their traumatized students

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on some shared human ground has evoked some of the most meaningful encounters of their teaching lives. I see the effects of the crisis where I teach, in the English department at the University of Chicago. When colleagues and graduate students who are teaching this term gather, the conversation often turns to how to bridge the chasm between the syllabus -- whatever it contains -- and the students who are looking for help in figuring out how to sustain a humane connection to a world that's overwhelming them.

I listen to these conversations, then I look at recent issues of scholarly journals in my field, and I feel as if I'm in two different worlds. For years, literary scholarship has been refining the art of stepping away from humane connection. This doesn't necessarily distinguish literary studies from other disciplines. Readers in a variety of fields may identify with the experience of a soon-to-be Ph.D. in English, someone who has always worked hard and played by the rules intellectually, who told me that since the terrorist attacks, she's derived less comfort than she expected from working on her dissertation. She also confessed that she can't blame the people who look at our discipline from the outside and say, "If you're not getting at anything that sustains people, what's the point?"

People everywhere are taking stock of their values and their goals, but if this sort of questioning leads to real self-reflection in the field of English, as I hope it does, we are in for an intense time. For the question "What's the point?" is at once an individual cry of disappointment and a tiny fragment from a pervasive, whispered conversation that has been taking place in English departments for years.

Many people find intellectual life in literary studies dry and unnourishing, but they have tended to feel isolated and their voices have not been heard. The tensions within the discipline have reached the media and our journals in the schematic form of a "culture war" between advocates of the Western tradition and postmodernists. Yet my friend who asked "What's the point?" fits into a large group of scholars who do not meet either description. While they are not traditionalists yearning for a return to the canon or to a monolithic view of culture, they nonetheless have convictions about "what sustains people" that many literary scholars would dismiss as conservative, universalist, or "humanist" illusions. The very phrase "what sustains people" might, for example, provoke the questions, "Which people are you presuming to speak for?" "Is everyone sustained by the same things?" These are crucial questions to ask, but they tend to be framed as accusations rather than as prompts to a real exchange.

My own experience is an example of how inhibiting these tensions can become. After I finished my first book 11 years ago and was suddenly freed by tenure from the necessity of adhering to the critical norms of the moment, I became, disappointingly, paralyzed. I was in great conflict about continuing to observe certain intellectual rules that were a part of the dominant thinking -- rules that I thought were very limiting but that I couldn't challenge without courting disgrace. Specifically, I felt I had to hide or smuggle in my convictions about what sustains people -- my faith, for example, in some quality of shared humanity that makes literary experience meaningful.

I remember a particularly bad season when I struggled with an article on Ulysses. I was writing about Joyce's insights into the touching human need to bury, burn, or otherwise take care of the

bodies of the dead -- an impulse that is universal, however differently loss and the communal response to it are experienced across cultures. I drew support for the notion that this is a universal phenomenon from the field of historical anthropology, which explores what is common and what changes across cultures and eras. Yet I was still afraid I'd be attacked for "essentializing" -- for supposing that there are shared features that constitute the essence of being human. For some reason, this fear of attack can be utterly compelling, particularly if your intellectual position can be dismissed on moral or quasi-moral grounds because it has something in common with ideas widely held on the political right.

I had had tenure for three years and had every reason to speak in my own voice for the sense of shared humanity that I believed in. But in the end, I never submitted the article for publication. I felt that something was wrong with the article: I couldn't get past the sense that in protecting myself behind the authority of the historical anthropologists, I was reinforcing the idea that the concept of the "human" must be discussed with a caution bordering on ventriloquism.

I moved beyond this impasse, but not before teaching a graduate seminar called "Authenticity" that I regret to say was not about the personal quality of authenticity but almost exclusively about what we in the humanities would term the social construction of authenticity. The readings I selected, which contextualized the idea of authenticity historically, had a lot of truth to them, but they made no space for a state of mind that could be called, positively, authenticity. "Authenticity," like the concept of "humanity," was raw and inappropriate and had to be properly cooked in order to be discussed. The authentic self was always scrutinized as a construct or a bourgeois illusion, not as a possible locus of truth or value.

My goal in teaching such a course was to introduce students to the norms of the profession, as well as to show that I was myself up-to-date. But in subordinating everything to these goals, I was unwittingly teaching a kind of contempt for the search for an authentic life, a search that within the conceptual terms of the

course could only look a little naive. We had excellent, substantive conversations in that seminar, but I knew that something was wrong when we turned to the poetry of Audre Lorde, which addresses the challenges of sustaining truth to oneself, and my terrific students, who ordinarily would discuss anything, were quiet. I could hardly get them to talk about Lorde's poetry at all. It was as if I had created an environment in which there was something Mickey Mouse about the soul.

While they can seem quite absolute, these professional norms that rule out certain domains of thought may become less compelling during a time of crisis. I cannot imagine but that the ordeal we are in the midst of nationally will change the tenor of academic conversations, even if only in small ways. There is great pressure on everyone to re-create a sense of meaning, from day to day, and it would be natural for some scholars to feel that it is a waste to write articles assuming intellectual postures that they are not themselves fully committed to.

As chance would have it, even before September 11, there were voices rehearsing for such a moment. A widespread disillusionment with the state of the art had started to penetrate even the pages of PMLA, the official journal of the Modern Language Association -- not yet in the articles, but in letters to the editor and most recently in a remarkable joint address, reprinted from last year's convention. Linda Hutcheon, the MLA president, condemned our current way of doing business as intellectually cliquish, arrogant, and competitive, while her colleague Nellie McKay decried the "intellectual violence" that she sees as routine in the academy, and pleaded for reflection on how we might reconcile the role of "critic" with that of "humanist."

Words like "humanity" and "authenticity" -- not to mention "humanist" -- which have been so problematic in intellectual circles in the last few decades, are likely to sound less corny or suspect to a good many people than they did before September 11. As Studs Terkel said in a recent radio interview reprinted in In These Times, "We're facing a certain challenging moment as though it were a test for us, a test of our intelligence as well as our, may I use the word, humanity." Terkel respectfully asks

permission to say "our humanity," yet it is only by recourse to this much contested phrase that he can get at something that he believes this trying time demands.

My own experience was that I couldn't get past the disciplinary taboos on certain words and ideals without undergoing a change of professional identity. In Disciplined Minds, the physicist Jeff Schmidt claims that professional training in physics, and by extension many other fields, has something in common with brainwashing, and that survival is a bit like deprogramming. The impediment to deprogramming in any environment is the threat of ostracism by the group, and as I started to rethink who I was intellectually, I braced myself. I thought I might become someone who would alienate old friends and acquire some new "friends" from the right, as well as new enemies who would assault me irreparably. But there was a moment when I decided to take a chance and fully examine what was wrong with the regulated atmosphere I had been trying to adapt to.

To give myself courage, I read Jane Tompkins's academic memoir, A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned, which tipped the balance. The insights that Tompkins unfolds from her perception that school "might not be good at bottom" were a part of what I needed to begin rebuilding my intellectual life. As I started expressing my evolving views publicly, I met some remarkable people in other fields who were themselves learning how to detach from their own training and redefine their goals.

Here's how I now see things. Many professions (conceivably all professions) bind initiates to themselves by inducing a subtle spiritual depletion -- what the legal theorist Duncan Kennedy, in his 1983 manifesto Legal Education and the Reproduction of Hierarchy, called the "sneaking depression of the pre-professional." In a superb book called Nuclear Rites, the anthropologist Hugh Gusterson describes how weapons scientists are subjected to training that involves rules of secrecy that have a debilitating effect on reasoning and moral judgment. The medical educator Rachel Naomi Remen describes a comparable process of self-loss in the field of medicine, where students and residents learn an excessive objectivity that puts them out of touch with

their own emotional and spiritual reserves. Systematic demoralization seems to be a hidden feature of many kinds of professional training, though each field develops its own mechanisms for producing this change.

The theoretical models that have dominated English and the related disciplines in the last two decades are especially effective tools (along with the institutional factors that have always existed) for creating demoralization. In their depletion of the meaning of such words as "authenticity" and "humanity," they eat away at a person's sense of having a vital emotional life apart from his or her professional identity.

I keep thinking, speculatively, that it may be no coincidence that the humanities have become in this sense a more perfectly closed world in the very decades in which the depressed job market has created a need for highly dedicated graduate students and part-time faculty members who won't keep asking if the nonacademic world has better opportunities for them. A message we send to those entering the field -- along with other, less damaging messages, to be sure -- is that there's no real authenticity anywhere, there's no humanity one can count on, and the world of humane attachments outside one's professional connections is naive, boring, or ideologically deluded. The best course is to devote oneself fully to developing within this field and to hope that there will be a solid academic job at the other end.

This narrowed view of life is communicated through subtle regulations for speech and thought that are pervasive but never discussed as regulations. These intimidating rules affect everyone's sense of self, making students and faculty members anxious, deflated, and hungry for the narcissistic supplies that the profession can offer to compensate for the loss of interior reserves.

I'm pretty sure that for as long as there have been English departments, there has been an imperative to renounce some of one's vitality and integrity in the service of one's professional "maturation." But the models for inquiry that dominate the humanities now also make a direct theoretical assault on the humane principles and aspirations that many students came into

the discipline with. So students learn to interpret those aspirations, and the younger self that embraced them, as incoherent and shameful, and are rewarded for treating that prior self with a kind of intellectual sadism.

I was discussing these ideas with a medievalist friend, who observed in response that "there is no growth without ascesis." He was using the religious term "ascesis" to describe the discipline of meaningful self-questioning or self-abnegation. His point was a powerful one: You can't educate without asking students to renounce much of what they formerly took for granted, including some dimensions of their younger selves. But there are environments in which ascesis, or renunciation, shades over into a kind of hazing, and people lose sight of what is being relinquished and what is being grown. In these environments, rather than the surrender of fixed assumptions that creates suppleness and awareness, there is the crushing experience of coming to despise what one still carries within oneself from the period before one merged with a group identity.

Still pondering my friend's remark, I did an Internet search of "ascesis," on the thought that the vicissitudes of monastic life might shed some light on the vicissitudes of life in the ivory tower. Here are a few telling words from the first two items I looked at. First is a passage that makes emotional sense to me, from a poem called "Ascesis" by a group of Cistercian nuns in Arizona:

> *Monastic tradition,*
> *immersing itself in the mind and heart of Jesus,*
> *urges us to purity of heart*
> *and invites us to take up*
> *in personal freedom and joy*
> *those tools of ascesis which shape us*
> *to inner stillness, fullness of love.*

I more than understand the depth and value of this experience of self-renunciation. But the second example gives a more troubling picture of ascesis. It is from a story of the Desert Fathers, an early Christian monastic community that stressed obedience to one's teacher more than these nuns in Arizona seem to, and the gift of personal freedom less: "Then Zacharias drew his hood off his head, put it under his feet and trampled on it, saying, 'The man who does not let himself be treated thus, cannot become a monk.'"

At the risk of unfairness to the Desert Fathers, which of these two passages reminds you more of your experience in graduate school? Unfortunately, the second, more assaultive variety of ascesis is hard to protest and even to spot when, as in the academy, it calls itself sophistication.

I've become aware of a key intellectual trick or error within much, though not all, current theory that works to get students to renounce their faith in their personal capacities -- faith, for example, in their own intuitions, in their creativity, and in their sense that simply by virtue of being human they carry a precious capacity for autonomous judgments about what is real.

This trick or mistake could be called the summoning of the near enemy, and it works in the following way. People can often become ethically confused because of a particular problem inherent in human dealings, namely, that any virtue has a bad cousin, a failing that closely resembles the virtue and can be mistaken for it -- what in Tibetan Buddhism is called the near enemy. For example, the near enemy of equanimity is apathy; the near enemy of compassion is a patronizing pity; the near enemy of love is possessive attachment; and so on. For whatever reason, English professors of the last two decades, like the Continental theorists upon whom we draw, have picked up this knot in human affairs and unknowingly worked it in such a way as to create great confusion, a confusion that ends up undermining people's attachment to any domain of ethical being outside the profession itself.

For example, let us say that there is such a thing as decency, which is a virtue. In the interest of decency, a person could refrain from taking credit for someone else's ideas, or forgo the thrill of humiliating a colleague. A second meaning of the word "decency," though, is adherence to a set of communal norms that are really a screen for class bias or prejudice. Thus in the name of decency, people can be condemned for wishing to read books about sex, or parents can pressure their children into securing a "decent" income and achieving a "decent" middle-class lifestyle.

What current critical theory often does, though, is to collapse the

difference, making the good thing look bad by calling it by the name of its near enemy -- saying that anyone who speaks up for decency is imposing an oppressive social norm. With numbing regularity, one finds articles that make cogent and indeed powerful claims about how bourgeois discourses, as they appear in one literary text or another, construct or engender in the reader a commitment to a repressive moralism, or to a particular kind of complacent, sentimental compassion. Yet these articles usually are silent on whether there is any kind of moral intuition or compassion that is not just an oppressive bourgeois illusion. Such articles effectively reduce all human goodness and tenderness to an artifact or a baneful self-indulgence, leaving the sense that the only exit from the deluded compassion of middle-class culture is in an identification with what is "vicious, scheming, proud, resourceful, vengeful," to quote from the most recent article I've read that meets this description.

Am I wrong in thinking that a posture that automatically values violent transgression over decency and compassion looks shallow in light of what our culture has been dealing with in the last two months?

Over and over it's happened that I've taken a second look at one or another scholarly article that seems particularly depressing and found that the article is unconsciously indulging in the analytical slippage I've just described, summoning the near enemy to discredit some life-sustaining ideal that most people wouldn't part with easily. Thus the near enemy of conscience is a punitive self-surveillance; the near enemy of any ideal of human individuality or expressiveness is "the Kantian subject," which has negative connotations; the near enemy of the heart is the human heart as envisioned by a Victorian sentimental ideology; the near enemy of the feeling of shared humanity is a bourgeois humanism that says we are all exactly the same; the near enemy of a belief in independent rational thought is the specter of the Cartesian subject, disembodied and severed from all historical context; and so on. What better way to create a soulless professionalism than to send subliminal messages that tear at an initiate's commitment to each of these things in turn -- conscience, individuality, the heart,

humanity, and independent rational thought? The effect of this systematic pulverization of many of the ideals that make life worth living is to create self-doubt, a trace of self-loathing, and a feeling of dissembling a little bit all the time in order to maintain professional status.

Is anyone really in favor of such professionalism? (Whose wishes, exactly, are being imposed here?) This question is hard to answer. I have a feeling that the transmission of values happens at a largely unconscious level, so that while one believes one is simply helping students to grow in professional competence, one is unknowingly compromising their inner reserves. I look at the striking uniformity of the articles published in major journals in my field, particularly by scholars who are trying to get a good foothold, and think of what Duncan Kennedy said about the uniformity that grows in the law classroom as the training progresses. After a time, "you'll find Fred Astaire and Howard Cosell, over and over again, but never Richard Pryor or Betty Friedan."

There are a good number of brilliant, innovative (and influential) scholars currently writing who do not contribute to the kind of crushing unreality I've described. For each such scholar, moreover, there are innumerable others whose thinking is a mix of the truly penetrating and the unreal. What I would wish to see is a profession that did a better job of teaching everyone how to distinguish for himself or herself between scholarship that moves things forward and scholarship that just shakes things up -- and, more subjectively, between the ascesis or self-transformation that produces integrity, flexibility, and moral independence, and the self-transformation that is more like a loss of self. A shift in this direction may happen in the next few years, if for no other reason than that integrity, flexibility, and moral independence are qualities whose value comes into high relief during a time of terrorism and war.

I believe that the pressures of the current national situation will converge with the pressures of an already latent dissent within the profession to produce some change, though whether the transformation will be more than superficial I can't predict. I hope that part of the change will involve a revived conversation about

what it is to be a teacher and scholar. It is interesting to review the various letters that over 200 MLA members wrote for a forum on the state of the profession in PMLA last year. As people reflected on what we should bring out in our professional and communal lives, certain words came up, including "emotion," "nuance," and "listening." Roberto Forns-Broggi wrote, "I am trying to bring forth the promise of the culture of listening." Jill Campbell wrote these poignant words: "I want my students, through the extraordinary supple and nuanced expressions of the human face and voice, to see and hear in one another why we care about literature at all."

These comments point to the craft of mindful listening that has been practiced all along, in our classrooms and in our intimate encounters with books, alongside the more highly rewarded craft of argumentation that for the moment has got us into a trough. A first step in rethinking what we are about as a profession may be to stop focusing on outsmarting one another and to find ways to foster the more intuitive and receptive dimensions of our communal and intellectual lives. Where this might lead methodologically I don't know. But as a best-case scenario, our profession may in time develop a culture that, without dispensing with traditional scholarship or critical theory, somehow uses literature as the basis for a complex exploration of the art of listening that is one of the creative forces in the world, a force moreover that our species would do well to cultivate if we want to have a good chance of surviving.

That may sound idealistic; a part of me says that as long as this profession is invested in hierarchy, which it always will be, there will be a built-in spiritual dullness that is the opposite of listening. But most people who decide to become teachers in the humanities, however invested we are in institutional security and prestige, also do this kind of work because we had an experience early in our lives of being taught how to let go of whatever we thought was the whole of reality and to take the measure of a larger moral and human universe. Maybe academic culture is at one of those rare junctures when the costs of closing ourselves off within a world as defined by the disciplinary norms of the moment will come to seem unacceptably high.

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