

# How to Destroy a European Faculty of Letters

## Twenty Five Easy Steps

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There is now a large literature, empirical, opinionated and often catastrophist, about the state of the humanities in the United States and in Great Britain. As far as I can see, the state of the humanities in Europe has provoked much less commentary and investigation. I know of nothing comparable to

Ginsberg, Benjamin, 2011, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters*

for Europe<sup>1</sup> but have found useful:

Collini, Stefan, 2012, *What are Universities for?*

Compagnon, Antoine, 1998, *Le démon de la théorie. Littérature et sens commun*

Ferraris, Maurizio, 2009 (first edition 2001), *Una ikea di università. Alla prova dei fatti*

Gally, Michèle, 2006, *Le bûcher des humanités. Le sacrifice des langues anciennes et des lettres est un crime de civilisation !*

Hass, Ulrike & Müller-Schöll, Nikolaus (eds.), 2009, *Was ist eine Universität? Schlaglichter auf eine ruinierte Institution*

Keisinger, F. et al. (eds.), 2003, *Wozu Geisteswissenschaften? Kontroverse Argumente für eine überfällige Debatte*

Schaeffer, Jean-Marie, 2011, *Petite écologie des études littéraires. Pourquoi et comment étudier la littérature?*

Sokal, Alan & Bricmont, Jean, 1997, *Impostures intellectuelles (Fashionable Nonsense, 1999)*

<sup>1</sup> Some information can be gleaned from: van den Doel et al. 2012;

[http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/higher\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/higher_en.htm);

<http://cordis.europa.eu/documents/documentlibrary/12.4376641EN6.pdf>;

[http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/Tertiary\\_education\\_statistics](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_statistics);

[http://www.acadeuro.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications/press\\_releases/Humanities\\_and\\_Social\\_Sciences\\_paper\\_to\\_the\\_Commission\\_Jan\\_2012\\_Fin\\_.pdf](http://www.acadeuro.org/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/press_releases/Humanities_and_Social_Sciences_paper_to_the_Commission_Jan_2012_Fin_.pdf);

<http://www.esf.org/research-areas/humanities.html>

I suspect I would find extremely useful

Hallén, Sören, 1989, *Humbuslandet: Vägvisare i kulturlandskapet*

were I able to read it.

By “Europe” I mean what is sometimes called the continent of Europe. By “Faculties of Letters” I mean Faculties of “lettres”, of “lettere”, of “humanities”, “arts”, the “Geisteswissenschaften”, and what is sometimes called a “Philosophisch-historische Fakultät”.

At the core of such institutional entities, which differ in very many ways, are the disciplines which study literature, art and music, language (linguistics), history and archaeology, and my own discipline, philosophy. Just what the relation is between this core and the over 90 different subjects listed under the heading “Geisteswissenschaften” in Germany I have no idea – because of the already noted relative absence of empirical studies of the humanities in Europe.

The striking absence of investigations, especially thorough empirical investigations, into the state of the humanities in Europe parallels the inability of European universities and institutions to create a publishing house which displays some of the qualities for which Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press and the major American university presses are well known.

I begin (§1) by sketching some 25 steps in the gradual destruction of a Faculty of Letters, which I shall call “FL”, over a period of some 25 years. FL is a composite entity bearing some resemblance to Faculties I have known. I then consider, in a very speculative fashion, some of the possible roots and consequences of such changes (§§2–3).

## §1 Twenty Five Steps

Once upon a time the University to which FL belonged appointed a full professor only after a meeting between the Rector and two *external experts from the relevant discipline* approved the choice of the appointments committee. This procedure was abolished. Some twenty years later a *student sits on every (small) appointment committee – and votes*. *Internal appointments* become normal and quickly transform what was once a very cosmopolitan Faculty. More and more *full professors are appointed who are incapable of lecturing* on a topic they have studied for over twenty years without the help of a prepared text. *Political pressure* is exerted to ensure the appointments of female professors. The Bologna process ensures the complete *spaghetification* of all curricula. (Understandably enough our Italian colleagues refer not to the Bologna process but to the “protocol of the Sorbonne”). More and more positions in pseudo-disciplines

are created. Some of these disciplines are foreign-bodies – positions in *pedagogy* and *educational science*. Others are home-grown – *Lacanian psychoanalysis*, *postmodernist “philosophy”*, *psychoanalytic clinical sexology*, *Gender Studies* and *Cultural Studies*. There is a gradual *oophorectomy (emasculation) of full professors*. The *incompetent* and *the inexperienced* are appointed to positions of power. *Academic freedom diminishes* – professors are not allowed to use their university titles when propounding their left-wing and right-wing opinions. *Foundations* outside the University play an increasingly important indirect role in appointments. *Administrators* take over and *paperwork* smothers teaching and research. Increasingly the central role of FL comes to be seen as the promotion of various *good-works*, from sustainable development and the ramifications of the universal care and benevolence industry (“mentoring”) to the promotion of women and “human rights” (once called “les droits de l’homme” in the French-speaking world and now, it seems, “les droits humains”). This role is not played to the same extent by other Faculties in European Universities.

Just how typical are such developments? Just how prejudiced are the epithets employed in my jaundiced sketch? In the absence of empirical research one is obliged to rely on the judgments of those best qualified to express an opinion. Here, for example, is the considered verdict of one of the great explainers of ancient philosophy, after a long and distinguished career in Oxford, Geneva and the Sorbonne, on two disciplines at the heart of the humanities:

Ancient philosophy is in a bad way. Like all other academic disciplines, it is crushed by the embrace of bureaucracy. Like other parts of philosophy, it is infected by faddishness. And in addition it suffers cruelly from the decline in classical philology. There is no cure for this disease.

You can’t do anything at all in ancient philosophy unless you know a bit of Greek and Latin, and you can’t do anything worthwhile in ancient philosophy unless you are a semi-decent classical scholar. But *classical scholarship is a dying art: there aren’t as many scholars as there used to be, and their grasp of the ancient languages and the ancient world weakens and trembles*. What’s more, fewer and fewer of them care to take up the philosophy of Greece and Rome ... *As far as philologically informed work on ancient philosophy is concerned, things were better fifty years ago.*<sup>2</sup>

And on the bureaucratic dead-hand behind the humanities in Europe:

There is in France an organization called the *Centre National de Recherche Scientifique* which dispenses unimaginably large sums of public money and is dedicated to the task of stifling research in the arts and sciences. It stifles with paper, and it stifles with electronic messages. It communicates in jargon and in acronyms. It does not use one sentence where two pages will suffice. It is peremptory in its commands. It is as pervasive as a London smog and as solid as blancmange. It is, as the bard put it, a whoreson zed, an unnecessary French letter. Every-

<sup>2</sup> Barnes 2006, emphases mine – KM.

where has its CNRS – under different names but smelling as rank. They waste time and energy – and oodles of cash. What is worse, far worse, they destroy professional standards and professional judgements.<sup>3</sup>

## §2 Distrust

Where does the bureaucracy come from? Why has it exploded since the 1990s? There are many explanations and they vary from country to country and from region to region. Thus many of the features of the excruciating torture to which British colleagues have been subjected, from the Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs), to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and its astonishing and grotesque Impact Factor,<sup>4</sup> are by and large – and for the moment – peculiar to Great Britain.

But there is, I suggest, I hope uncontroversially, one common element. Bureaucrats and politicians do not trust academics. Rectors, Vice-Chancellors, Magnificences and their like do not trust their fellow-academics. On many matters such distrust is justified. The allocation of the resources of a University is a matter for Rectors and their ilk. Perhaps the same is true of decisions about research priorities. But once the decision has been taken to create a position in some discipline then, in an ideal world, it is surely the specialists in that discipline who should be trusted to exercise their professional judgment. But this is not what happens, certainly not in FL. Instead the powers, privileges and authority of those erstwhile Gods, the full professors, *Ordinariens* and other mandarins shrink from year to year. In Sweden, I am told, only one University has avoided this fate – Uppsala. As in the EU and the Catholic Church, the virtues of subsidiarity are preached but not practised.

In FL this distrust lies behind internal appointments and their inevitable consequence – full professors who cannot lecture without a prepared text. It is behind political pressure to create Gender Studies, the introduction of positions in pedagogy, the rôle of foundations in circumventing normal appointments procedures and the rôle students play in academic appointments.

In part this distrust is a product of so-called *democratisation* – the view that every difference is an example of inequality. Many full professors believe in or are not prepared to oppose democratisation, which they think has something to do with democracy. Like Rectors, administrators and politicians, they do not believe in full professors or the *mandarinat* either. The political prostitution of Universities, like prostitution *tout court*, invariably attracts pimps.

Is there an alternative? Is it possible to have something like the situation which used to prevail in the US and is still so rare in Europe – where every member of a De-

partment wants to belong to a very good (perhaps even the best) department, where subsidiarity is practised? Let the full professors and only the full professors in a discipline be responsible for appointments and take the credit and the blame for mistakes. Let Faculties and Rectors decide whether a Department may make an appointment. Let experts in the discipline have the final word. As used to be the case in FL.

## §3 Disbelief & Foolishness

Disbelief and distrust are two quite different things. To believe in God is to take her to exist. But very often to believe in something or someone – the American Way, capitalism, deconstruction, democratisation, a professor – is to take it or him to exemplify some positive value. Similarly, to disbelieve in something or someone is often to take it or her to exemplify some negative value.

Universities are in principle places where – more than anywhere else – one type of value is held aloft: the value of knowledge, its acquisition, its transmission and its preservation. In Universities the opposition between cognitive values and virtues – the values of truth, knowledge, clarity, justification, argument – and cognitive disvalues and vices – bullshit, charlatanry, obscurity, obscurantism, illusion and error – is alive.<sup>5</sup> In principle, academics believe in knowledge.

It is a strange feature of the contemporary University and of the contemporary world that although ethicists and ethics – medical ethics, the ethics of banking, ecological ethics, even ethical fashion and ethical coffee – are omnipresent, next to no attention is paid to the theory and understanding of intellectual and cognitive vices (except in Departments of Philosophy). Pharisees, who believe strongly in ethics and the ethical, are not interested in the intellectual virtues.

An even stranger feature of Faculties of Letters in general, and of FL in particular, is that the belief in knowledge and in truth is there heavily qualified or even the object of suspicion. Who in the contemporary University has not at some time come across a humanist who pronounces “verità” or “Objektivität” or “justification” or “clarté” while gesturing with his hands towards the equivalent of scare-quotes? The sneering gestures or intonation which accompany such words often go hand in hand with a quite reverential attitude towards such words as “Kritik”, “critique”, “criticism” and “unmasking”. And of course the inconsistency goes unremarked.

A recent writer notes the phenomenon in passing, as though it were a platitude:

<sup>3</sup> Barnes 2006, emphases mine – KM.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Collini 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Just how causally effective the belief in cognitive values is, in particular in hard science, is an interesting empirical question (cf. Hull 1988).

To say academic freedom is necessary for the expression of truth seems problematic inasmuch as many scholars, particularly within the humanities, would not characterize the purpose of their teaching and research as truth-seeking.<sup>6</sup>

In order to understand this phenomenon it is, I suggest, essential to bear in mind one of the most distinctive features of enquiry in Faculties of Letters – its relation to value and values.

The acquisition of cognitive virtues is an integral part of a university education. Cognitive virtues are acquired both by the student of physics or biology and by the student in the humanities. But only in the latter case is the object of the exercise of cognitive virtues the everyday human world (the *Lebenswelt*, the natural world-view), the world of values and norms – ethical, economic, political and aesthetic. History, literary criticism and the criticism of art and music, as well as practical philosophy and normative philosophy, are concerned with values and norms. Faculties of Letters differ from other Faculties in that their members are expected, and so allowed, to make value judgements about ethical, practical and political matters, past and present. This is true of philosophers when they go in for normative theories, political and ethical. It is also true of critics, for example, of literary critics. But it is not true of empirical psychologists, neuroscientists, physicists or chemists. We expect a physicist to evaluate the work of his colleagues and students. We do not expect him to invoke the authority of physics to condemn corruption.

Properly understood, this claim is not, I think, controversial. It is not a very common claim, since the language of values is not much used outside Departments of Philosophy and certain types of political cant. I shall return to it. But it is worth noting that, if true, it suggests that students of empirical science and mathematics, unlike students of the humanities, do not, as such, learn to think hard about questions of ethical, political and aesthetic value.

This difference between the “two cultures” lies behind the claim, rarely heard nowadays, that an education in the humanities contributes to a person’s *Bildung*, inner freedom and critical spirit, where “critical” refers to what was once called the criticism of life. It goes without saying that numerous cognitive virtues, in particular those of critical thinking, are in principle acquired both by students outside the humanities and by those in the humanities.

The value judgments of literary critics include judgments about the political and ethical questions at the heart of literary works of art, but also of course aesthetic judgments. The terminology of “value judgments” is not popular within literary criticism. But that is not important. There can be no doubt that political, ethical and aesthetic judgments are at the heart of literary criticism – however they are dressed up. And that is as it should be. Consider, for example,

<sup>6</sup> Douglas 2012.

When I think of the most important works of postwar criticism, I think of Frye’s *Anatomy*, Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*, Stanley Fish’s *Surprised by Sin*, Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight*, Said’s *Orientalism*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, and Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men* – books that launched or largely defined, respectively, myth criticism, narratology, reader-response criticism, *deconstruction*, *postcolonial criticism*, *feminist criticism*, New Historicism, *contemporary Marxist criticism*, and *queer studies*.<sup>7</sup>

Or this, from an influential handbook:

Current intellectual discourse in the humanities and human science ... is *engagé* in ways that might have made even Sartre uncomfortable, because of its restless *concern for the excluded and marginalised* ...<sup>8</sup>

Many of these value judgments are victimological,<sup>9</sup> and are formulated with the help of oppositions and distinctions such as

male–female, heterosexual–homosexual, white–black, white–yellow, imperial–oppressed, capitalism–oppressed, the included–the excluded, the orientalism of the West–the Middle East

Even Deconstructionism, originally a philosophy devised by the immensely popular French philosopher, the late Jacques Derrida, is victimological. According to this philosophy,

differences/the marginal/contingent/context/intertext  
are/is oppressed by and are/is to be preferred to  
the centre/identities/essentialism/the canon

Of course the term “victimological” is generally used only by a conservative critic of what she sees as the leftist or progressive tendencies in literary criticism. According to such a critic, victimology yields at best merely cartoon-strip evaluations. But for present purposes this is beside the point. What is important is that both the conservative critic and the critics he disagrees with are concerned with questions of value.

On the one hand, then, there is the scepticism about cognitive values within Faculties of Letters. On the other hand, there is the crucial role in many of the disciplines within such Faculties of the practice of aesthetic, ethical and political judgment. There is an obvious tension here. How on earth can one make evaluative judgements and simultaneously scorn truth, knowledge, clarity and justification?

The peculiar combination of vociferous value judgments and the denial that one is

<sup>7</sup> Deresiewicz 2011. Emphases mine – KM.

<sup>8</sup> Payne & Barbera (eds.) 2010 (1997).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bawer 2012.

in the business of truth-seeking is, it often seems, at the heart of the humanities. It is a combination which, like much else in Faculties of Letters, goes back to Nietzsche, who, often on the same page, proclaims that the value of life is higher than the value of truth and that value judgments are not true or false. We must, Nietzsche tells us, learn to live without truth.

There are (analytic) philosophers who argue that no incompatibility is involved here. But debates about “quasi-realism” play little role outside philosophy departments. A quasi-realist may be cognitively virtuous. In Faculties of Letters cognitive vice is proudly proclaimed and exemplified.

In between Nietzsche and current literary and cultural “theory” there lies Continental Philosophy, which, like the Belgian Empire, is a Franco-German creation. In nearly all the intellectual communities which owe their existence to Continental Philosophy words such as “truth”, “justification”, “knowledge” and “objectivity” are rarely used. They are, as we have noted, merely mentioned and the object of gesticulation and sneers. This is particularly true of those marked by the postmodernisms of Lyotard and Rorty, the anti-realism of Foucault, Vattimo and Rorty, and the deconstructionism of Derrida and his ilk – three very implausible types of philosophy. My discipline, philosophy, then, must take some of the blame for the state of Faculties of Letters. Keynes famously wrote:

... the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.<sup>10</sup>

Whether or not Keynes was right about the influence of economists and philosophers his words apply marvellously well to the influence of a handful of French and German philosophers on the humanities. The philosophers of postmodernism and deconstruction now enjoy an extraordinary “impact factor”. Indeed, as has been often recognised, the political philosophy of the Belgian Empire is now postmodernist.

The symptoms of scepticism about cognitive values include obscurantist language, the belief that one can change the world without seeking the truth, axiological simplifications in which there are only goodies and baddies, and the lack of interest in any criticism of such fashionable simplifications.<sup>11</sup> As the editor of an already quoted handbook in what is called “Cultural Theory” puts it:

<sup>10</sup> Keynes, John Maynard, 1973 (1936) *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Book 6, ch. 24, p. 383 (Volume VII, *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, Cambridge: Macmillan, St. Martin's Press).

<sup>11</sup> For specimens of such criticism see the remarkable nosological investigations of literary criticism by Brian Vickers (e.g. Vickers 1993), and Elster 2012.

Current intellectual discourse in the humanities and human science is often messy, difficult, ... its language has occasionally seemed far too difficult, tortured, or obscure.<sup>12</sup>

The home of obscurantism within the humanities is what was and, indeed, still is, often called “Theory” – unlike biological or logical theory, a proudly unadorned noun. Theory, long at home in FL, is or was characterised by the fact that it invariably made use of bad science or pseudo-science – psychoanalysis, Marxism, structuralism, semiotics. There is of course room for *theories* of literature, that is to say, for *general* and systematically connected truths about literature, its nature and structure, and about knowledge of literature, even though literary criticism is also concerned with understanding *individual* works of arts and traditions. But pseudo-science is not the right way to go about things.

It is, I suggest, *because* the humanities are sceptical of cognitive values that their political and ethical projects are so badly conceived and “defended”.

Antoine Compagnon lets the cat out of the bag when he notes just how tempting it is to think that *theory* is, in fact, *just literature*:

Ainsi, la théorie littéraire ressemble par bien des côtés à une fiction. On n'y croit pas positivement, mais négativement, comme à l'illusion poétique, suivant Coleridge. Du coup, on me reprochera peut-être de la prendre excessivement au sérieux et de l'interpréter trop littéralement. La mort de l'auteur? Mais ce n'est qu'une métaphore, dont les effets furent d'ailleurs stimulants. La prendre au pied de la lettre et pousser ses raisonnements à leur limite, comme dans le mythe du singe dactylographe, c'est faire preuve d'une extravagante myopie ou d'une singulière surdité poétique, comme de s'arrêter aux fautes de langue dans une lettre d'amour. L'effet de réel? Mais c'est une jolie fable, ou un haïku, car il y manque la morale. Qui a jamais cru qu'il fallait scruter la théorie à la loupe? Elle n'est pas applicable, elle n'est donc pas “falsifiable”, elle doit être regardée elle-même comme de la littérature. Il n'y a pas à lui demander compte de ses fondements épistémologiques ni de ses conséquences logiques. Ainsi, il n'y a pas de différence entre un essai de théorie littéraire et une fiction de Borges ou une nouvelle de Henry James, comme “La leçon du maître” ou “L'image dans le tapis”, ces contes au sens indécidable.<sup>13</sup>

His suspicions are widely shared:

Current intellectual discourse in the humanities and human science ... crosses the traditional boundaries that once (always uncertainly) separated the creative from the critical ...<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Payne & Barbera (eds.) 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Compagnon 1998 p. 307.

<sup>14</sup> Payne & Barbera 2010.

Suppose that, as I have suggested, there is a deep tension in many Literature Departments between scepticism about cognitive values, on the one hand, and the practice of evaluation, on the other hand. One way out of the tension is to assimilate evaluation to its object, to creation, to reject their difference. Freedom – with one bound.

One striking feature of FL is the extent to which its Departments of Literature are increasingly attracted by such subjects as travel literature (the more minor, the better), the history of texts, editions and manuscript production, Lacanian clinical sexology, rap music, global French, the history of medicine and psychiatry, cognitive science fiction and even Tintinology. Whatever one may think of the intrinsic value of research in these areas one may wonder whether, once concentration on such areas has reached a certain level, this does not amount to what might be called a flight from the centre, from a canon in which one no longer believes. In a recent very positive review of a book on the material dimensions of medieval religious art, Gabriel Josipovici comments on the reproduction of a sculpture by the author:

... her main interest in it is that there is a hole at the back where relics could be inserted. No doubt this is important, but focusing on it ignores the primary effect of the work. It is an effect that Ruskin and Proust understood to be central to much medieval art, and they found the words to convey it. A critic and scholar who could combine the learning and sophistication of the modern medievalist and Proust's sense of the wonder of medieval art – now that would be something.<sup>15</sup>

What relation, if any, is there between distrust and disbelief, between the types of distrust and disbelief identified so far? Trust is a species of belief in and distrust of a species of disbelief in. To believe in something is to believe it to have some value and to identify with that value. To trust someone is to believe him to be trustworthy and to believe in his trustworthiness. The distrust of full professors mentioned above, which is shared by so many Rectors, politicians and bureaucrats, is in fact a species of disbelief. In the humanities, it seems, there is disbelief in cognitive values and in the disciplines at the heart of the humanities. To the extent that this is the case, distrust of professors of the humanities is in fact wholly justified.

There is a name for disbelief in cognitive values – foolishness (*stultitia, sottise*). Foolishness is not stupidity. Stupidity is no vice but a defect. Foolishness is a vice at the heart of which there is an indifference, or hostility, to the value of knowledge and connected values. An immediate consequence of this definition is that postmodernists are foolish.<sup>16</sup> The vice of FL and of those Faculties of Letters which resemble it is foolishness. It is disbelief in what Universities stand for.

Knowledge is an achievement. To come to know that something is the case is to

<sup>15</sup> Josipovici 2012 p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Mulligan 2009.

make one's own something which is quite complex. It is typically to come to see why something is the case, to see how some fact is related to many other facts. It is above all to come to be able to reply coherently to the question: *How* do you know that? And to the question: *Why* do you believe that? It is a resource to be drawn upon, one which is permanently available. I do not know what the causal relationship is between attachment to cognitive values and the acquisition of knowledge. The question is largely empirical.<sup>17</sup> But it seems that aversion to cognitive values is unlikely to lead to knowledge, other things being equal.

Knowledge is not information. The flow and circulation of information is not the flow and circulation of knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Knowledge is an individual achievement, unlike the activity of absorbing information. Our macrocosm is now the world of information. But one little microcosm, European Faculties of Letters, mimics the features of the macrocosm very thoroughly and does this wittingly. In the humanities, for over thirty years, an immense number of different “discourses” (*discorsi, Diskurse*) have circulated and flowed – semiological, structuralist, post-structuralist, Marxist, feminist, cultural, deconstructionist ... But to participate in the flux and circulation of such “discourses” is not to come to know. Indeed it is by no means obvious that such “discourses” even count as information.

If even part of what I have suggested is plausible, parts of the humanities are in the process of destroying themselves. Since they no longer believe in themselves they are distrusted. Since they are distrusted they will either disappear or their functions will be transformed. One such transformation is already apparent. For in at least one respect the humanities are trusted. They can be relied on to play the role of useful clowns. In the modern European University someone has to promote – and be seen to promote – the already mentioned good works. Who better than the full professor of the humanities? After all, she is more likely than anyone else to believe in the usefulness and intrinsic value of such good works, especially if she has victimological inclinations. The rôle of useful clown complements in many ways one by now traditional function of the “discourses” of European humanities and philosophy – intellectual titillation. The cheap intellectual thrills provided by the ever changing fashions in Theory and its ilk are a sociological factor that few Rectors can afford to ignore. How else can one explain the strange phenomenon of Rectors and Provosts who, after a distinguished career in one or another hard science, hasten to hand out honorary doctorates to charlatans and invite psychoanalysts to address their Universities?

Whether or not these gloomy prognoses and suggestions are plausible parts of the humanities are increasingly coming under attack not from the handful of critics of fashionable nonsense but from naturalistically minded philosophers and cognitive

<sup>17</sup> Cf. note 5 above.

<sup>18</sup> For a recent eloquent defence of this view, cf. Engel 2007.

scientists. And they are ill-prepared to deal with this attack. The philosopher of biology, Alexander Rosenberg, recently had this to say:

Once you recognize that there is no way to take seriously both what neuroscience tells us about the springs of human action in the brain and what introspection tells us about it, you have to choose. Take one fork and seek interpretation of human affairs in the plans, purposes, designs, ideologies, myths, or meanings that consciousness claims actually move us. *Take the other fork, the one that scientism signposts, and you must treat all the humanities as the endlessly entertaining elaborations of an illusion.* They are all enterprises with no right answers, not even coming closer to approximating our understanding of anything. You cannot treat the interpretation of behavior in terms of purposes and meaning as conveying real understanding ... It's obvious why most people have chosen the interpretative culture of the humanities, the path of embroidering on illusion, even after science hit its stride. To begin with, there was selection for the theory-of-mind ability, which carried along conscious thoughts that seem to be about the conspiracies behind people's behavior. The ability still works, up to limits that social and behavioral science has discovered.<sup>19</sup>

A more modest but potentially no less damaging point is made by the philosopher Greg Currie:

*But the idea that we learn nothing, of any kind, in any way, about the mind from literature would surely be rejected by most serious readers with no theoretical axe to grind ...* Is the practice of fiction one we can reasonably expect to give us the insight we hope for? Are serious fiction writers well equipped to give us that insight? Finally and most radically, is what I'm supposed to be learning consistent with or supported by the best science? ... Most of the work I have in mind operates at the psychological and not at the neurological level, and represents no radical break with our ordinary talk of belief, desire, feeling, imagery and the rest. Some of it – the work on character and situation reported below is a perfect example – requires no conceptual shifting at all, but merely a revision of romantic prejudice. It is the outcome of careful and thoughtful observation of people's actions, with attention to comparison with controls, and the elimination of confounding factors. How could that not be relevant to understanding the kinds of agents we are? ... Take that staple of literary psychology: character; character explanations are top predators in the hunt for meaning: show that someone's action flows, not just from their wishes but from their character, and you have the best example there is, short of invoking the deity, of behaviour found to be meaningful. *But a lot of evidence suggests that character plays a surprisingly insignificant role in human behaviour, which is highly sensitive to small, even trivial changes in circumstances.*

So: our natural inclination to focus on the maximization of meaning leaves us vulnerable to bad errors in thinking about the mind, errors which systematic experimental work has done something to expose. *The institutions of fiction, and the psychology of the creative artist, do nothing to keep us on track, and so literature's filling in the detail of an already mistaken picture just makes things worse. That's the message at its most pessimistic.*

At most, I am urging a clarification, a recognition that when we engage seriously with great literature we do not come away with more knowledge, better abilities, clarified emo-

19 Rosenberg 2011 pp. 211ff. Emphases mine – KM.

tions or deeper human sympathies. We do exercise capacities that let us explore a fascinating, demanding conception of what human beings are like – *probably a wrong one.*<sup>20</sup>

I believe that Currie and Rosenberg are wrong about literature and that the study of literature, art and music lies at the heart of a Faculty of Letters. But is there any point in defending adults who have decided, very deliberately, to commit suicide?

Let me conclude as I began, with Jonathan Barnes:

Apocalypse next year, and three horsemen: the *White Knight of Unlearning*, the *Cream-faced Count Charlatan*, and the *Black Baron Bureaucracy*. The *Count* is perhaps the least menacing of the three. After all, philosophy is nothing if not a thing of fads and fashions. Fifty years ago the phrase “continental philosophy” meant nothing. And no doubt fifty years hence the continental drift will have stopped. Except in France. The Knight is the most dangerous. There is no unhorsing him. He is there for keeps. Classics will continue to decline. In a few decades, the study of Greek will match the study of Coptic or of Akkadian. And there's nothing anyone can do about that ... As for the Baron, we could unseat him. By “we” I mean those of us whose careers are not still on the line, who have more memories than hopes – though perhaps a few hopes still ... *But will we resist? Yes – when Hell freezes.* That's why the Baron is the most infuriating of the horsemen – and he knows it.<sup>21</sup>

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20 Currie 2011. Emphases mine – KM.

21 Barnes 2006. Emphases mine – KM. One of the many things to note in this passage, as literary critics used to say, is the casual elegance and precision of the prose, a prose most of us in the humanities are no longer capable of writing or appreciating.

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