

History and Human Flourishing

Edited by

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OXFORD
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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: McMahon, Darrin M., editor, author.

Title: History and human flourishing / edited by Darrin M. McMahon.

Description: New York : Oxford University Press, [2023] |

Series: The humanities and human flourishing | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022026852 (print) | LCCN 2022026853 (ebook) | ISBN 9780197625279 (paperback) |

ISBN 9780197625262 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780197625293 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: History—Philosophy. | Success. | Conduct of life. | Well-being.

Classification: LCC D16.9 .H548 2023 (print) | LCC D16.9 (ebook) | DDC 901—dc23/eng/20220616

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022026852>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022026853>

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197625262.001.0001

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Paperback printed by Marquis, Canada

Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc., United States of America

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1

C1

History, the Humanities, and the Human

D. Graham Burnett

C1.P1

Serious engagement with fundamental questions is humbling. And the question before us is fundamental: What role, if any, can the study of history play in the essential good that we are here going to call “human flourishing”? It would be churlish not to be daunted by a question of such depth, significance, and scope. And I must confess that, sitting down to compose a reply, I *do* feel a little daunted. But it also feels like there is no place to hide. Anyone who has a “professional” commitment to study the past—anyone who claims the teaching of history as a vocation—should be answerable on the question as posed. I can see no good excuses for any dodging, sidestepping, or erudite explaining away (or “reframing” away—an academic stock-in-trade). Too much sophistication is probably to be mistrusted here. Someone is asking me to explain myself. Even, possibly, to defend myself. Let me see what I can do, in the name of the work I love.

C1.P2

For starters, I want to embrace the terms in which the question has been set: the notion of “flourishing” strikes me as adequately capacious to gather and hold anything we might want to adduce as a good. Within it, I think I discern a residual naturalism (a sense of “health” and “growth”). At the same time, however, the term conveys a sense of “life in abundance” that happily overflows mere “organic vitality” and expands into the zones of spiritual/metaphysical well-being. Words convey moods. And it is interesting that “flourish” somehow manages, in current usage, to elide some of the basic antinomies that so easily whipsaw efforts to think about the good life. One does not sense, for instance, a tension between the individual and the group or community in the term “flourish.” To “flourish” is not, in any obvious way, to “win.” Similarly, the language of “flourishing” feels agnostic about the various *excelsiors* of “excellence” more generally. In the ideal of flourishing one senses something of the Aristotelian virtue of the mean, even as the term seems in no way hostile to the pursuit of one or another form of greatness (of soul, of achievement, etc.).

D. Graham Burnett, *History, the Humanities, and the Human* in: *History and Human Flourishing*. Edited by: Darrin M. McMahon, Oxford University Press. © Oxford University Press 2023. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197625262.003.0002

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C1.P3 So what kind of flourishing is at issue? *Human* flourishing. A moment, then, on that term “human.” It has, of course, come under enormous and increasing pressure over the last fifty years. We have been asked to consider the (often troubling) history of the category: its activation in litany of exclusions, violent parochialisms, and laboriously “principled” injustices. In sifting these stories, attention has fallen again and again on the very particular (and ideologically charged) “human sciences” that gave form—gave *tooth?*—to the concept of the human in the modern period. As a consequence of these historical reassessments (and also in parallel but distinct intellectual and activist traditions), various “post-humanisms” have been proposed—organic, mechanomorphic, even “vibrant.” I’m sympathetic to much of this new work, in part, I think, because I come out of the history and philosophy of science, a field that has been especially concerned with historicizing the human (and interrogating the forms of knowledge that have authorized the category). It is also the case that I am a basically “histrionic” thinker. I like strange ideas. And I like trying to think “otherly.” In this regard thinking as (or with) the nonhuman has, of late, proven a rich resource. But for all that, I remain essentially committed to the category of the human, and understand my work as a scholar and teacher to center on this category in ways I hope to sketch here.¹

C1.P4 So, “history and human flourishing.” The problem is as serious (for a historian) as could be imagined. The terms are well chosen. The work is before us.

C1.P5 Although perhaps we need another moment of overture. Since there is one more term that we have not yet tested: What about “history”? Are we sure we have a sense of what this is? Embarrassingly, while I must own up to having now been a more or less professional historian for nearly twenty-five years, I remain seriously uncertain about the scope/limits/essence of this enterprise. And yet only if we can be sufficiently specific about just what activities we have in mind as “history” will we be able to speak to history’s merits in relation to that very grand aspiration to “flourish as humans.”

C1.P6 Let me try. It has sometimes felt to me that history can be figured as a Janus: one head, but with two faces, each with a mouth; and these mouths

¹ In the last ten years I have been increasingly drawn to a slightly different formulation—borrowed from the French theorist Bernard Stiegler: the “non-inhuman.” There is a chastened air in that double negative, and it suits a humanism that has put aside its laurels for a penance of sackcloth and ashes. Anyone who proposes to work in, or in relation to, this tradition must acknowledge that there is much for which to atone. I take the awkwardness of Stiegler’s coinage to be a proper overture in the direction of the humility that is needed. We want a “weak humanism,” conceived in parallel to Gianni Vattimo’s *pensiero debole* (“weak thought”).

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speak in very different directions. One kind of history leans forward to whisper in the ear of the prince. Which is to say, it is the highest aspiration of one very real kind of history to inform the work to shape, maintain, and ameliorate social/political order. Such history moves from the assumption that a more just society can emerge through, or by means of, a proper knowledge of the past. To be effective, then, this history must be heard by those who have (or seek to have) *power*.²

Ci.P7 But there is that other mouth. And that mouth does not need the ear of power. Because that other mouth seeks only to whisper the solace of companionship into the ear of anyone who might feel alone. Which is to say, this other mouth has no use for the prince, because it has no designs on the transformation of society or politics. It has chosen compassion over justice, and consolation over power—and therefore has as its highest aim the simple work of giving us to each other in forms or modes sufficiently similar as to be recognizable, and sufficiently different as to extend our sense of what it might be to be ourselves.³ In this sense, the second mouth sings into being an expanding and deepened “we,” and in doing so makes real a sense that we are at home on Earth, and in the company it keeps.

Ci.P8 The former project, the first mouth, correlates loosely with the enterprise of history in its social-scientific mode. The latter is probably synonymous with history as practiced in the key of the humanities. The former enterprise understands the past as relevant to the worldly problems of now (and what is to come). The latter project understands the past as a vast and precious resource in the ongoing work of fortifying ourselves against despair, solipsism, and alienation. The former wants to make the world a better place to live. The latter wants to teach us to live (and to die) in the world onto which we open our eyes. If the former strives for amelioration of our conditions, the latter seeks an imperishable bliss—but must content itself with the perishable kind (the only bliss immediately available to perishable creatures).⁴

² In democratic politics, it is possible to interpret “prince” here to mean “the people.” Which is to say, those forms of history that want to address questions of social order and collective life do not literally have to aspire to land on the night-table of the president (supposing, for a moment, a president who reads). They can seek to “educate the people” about the past in ways that are intended to inform and transform the political community—in its social dynamics, or in its formal legal and administrative arrangements, or in its economic architecture.

³ “To recognize one’s own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1960]), p. 13.

⁴ “Imperishable bliss” is borrowed from Wallace Stevens’s *Sunday Morning*. One of the readers of this essay suggested I offer examples of these two historical modes as I conceive them. There are defenders of each, I would say, in this very volume: David Armitage and Nicole Eustace speak to the first, if in very different ways; Dan Edelstein and Darrin McMahan, for instance, can be read as

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Cl.P9

This somewhat melodramatic bifurcation of the historical “voice”—while important to me, and, I think, significant in thinking about history generally—perhaps launches our thinking in air that is a little too thin to breathe easily. There are many other ways to parse the term that are a good deal closer to earth, and no less important to the question at hand. So some more plodding distinctions are probably in order. After all, in common usage we mean such different things by the term “history.” Sometimes, we use the word loosely, to designate something like “the stuff of the past; what happened back then.” At other times, the term is used, with a higher degree of methodological self-consciousness, to denote “our reconstructions of the past; our best efforts to arrive at, and convey, true accounts of what happened back then.” Those of a universitarian disposition or habitat may use the term much more narrowly, to refer to the *academic discipline* formally held responsible for the research, writing (primarily, though other means of bodying-forth research are increasingly seen), and teaching of what, at any given time, are assessed as being our best veridical accounts of the past. In this context, the term designates a *department* in addition to a “field”—and possibly even a *building on campus*.

Cl.P10

And so, we might want to parse our large question about “history and human flourishing” into a set of more discrete subproblems that the question seems to imply: Does the *possession of knowledge of the past* contribute to human flourishing? Does the *practice of studying the past* (either in the sense of reading “histories” written by others, or in the sense of immersing oneself in old texts and artifacts) contribute to human flourishing? Does the *work of doing “History” in a disciplinary sense* contribute to human flourishing?⁵ Do individual humans *actually flourish* in doing any/all of these things?

addressing the second. What about monographic studies out in the larger world of academic history? Any specific title will feel a little adventitious, since each side of the Janus represents a vast domain of historical achievement, and no single author can stand the weight of exemplarity in such a context. But to choose, somewhat at random, a pair of works I admire: as history that wishes to be heard by those who can effect change, take my colleague Kevin Kruse’s *One Nation Under God*, which reveals the “constructedness” (and flim-flammetry) of the Christian Right’s conception of the United States; for an example of history in what I think of as the “humanist” key, I adduce the searching work of Greg Denning, for instance the classic *Islands and Beaches*. Part of what appeals to me in the Janus image is that there is *one head* there, and—presumably, though I do not know of this being widely discussed—*one mind*. This activates, in the metaphor, the extent to which these very different “vectors” of history articulation (these different “mouths”) do indeed come from a shared locus of reflection and inquiry. Becoming a historian is becoming a recognizable thing, and, in my experience, radically different historians share a remarkably robust sense of what “doing history” is.

⁵ I’ll define the “work of doing history in a disciplinary sense” as the current professional form of life that involves (1) studying primary sources in such a way as to make them stand in relation to

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- Ci.P11 We have parsed. Now it is time to try to say something for real.
 Ci.P12 But is this possible? Is it a good idea?

* * *

- Ci.P13 I have a strong memory of coming across one of the *I Believe* books right about the time I started my academic career. I am not certain how it came into my possession. I suspect I picked it up in the course of reading around in the work of Clifton Fadiman, the dean of American mid-century aspirational (middlebrow?) learnedness. Anne Fadiman, his daughter, had become a friend and mentor (she was the editor of the *American Scholar* across a heroic run in the life of that publication), and I had been fortunate enough to have come under her careful editorial pen. The *I Believe* series was the editorial brainchild of Fadiman senior, who, during the interwar period, conceived to commission and publish a series of “credo” statements by a set of intellectual and artistic and scientific notables. Contributors ranged from H. L. Menken to Bertrand Russell, from Einstein to Dewey. And the charge was as ambitious as could be: to write a kind of “testament of belief”; to commit to paper that to which one was *committed*. My recollection is that the first edition was sufficiently successful that a follow-up volume came in suite—perhaps a decade later, permitting the original participants to update their creeds from the new perspective afforded by several years progress toward global calamity.⁶

- Ci.P14 What struck me in reading my secondhand copy of the volume, found in a local bookstore (it was a buckram hardback, and the thickish, yellowed pages gave off a tobacco scent of gravitas), was the way the essays seemed to share a feel for the work of declaring “where one stood.” And shared, too, a sense that this work was a shared work—even a shared *obligation*. Yes, of course, there was something mid-century bourgeois-complacent about this tenor or mood. Yes, the volume can be understood to participate in the discourse of the “Crisis of Man” that Mark Greif has characterized (and historicized) in his *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973*. Yes, there was a genuine ponderousness here and there, and also,

the established secondary literature in the field; while also (2) participating in the evaluation of the ongoing efforts of others to do the same; while also (3) teaching these practices, and their results, to postsecondary students of various kinds.

⁶ A little research reveals that the volume entitled *I Believe* was in fact the second of the series, published in 1939. The earlier one was published in 1931 as *Living Philosophies*.

mostly throughout, a clubroom air of entitlement to opine that felt, even in 2000, troublingly unselfconscious, and that would no doubt catch in the craw a good deal worse were I to go back to the book today.

Ci.P15

But still, I remember finding relief in those pages. Relief from what felt like a want of any comparable willingness to *declare* in the intellectual spaces and communities that had shaped me (as a student), and within which I hoped to stay (as a scholar and teacher). This was surely, at least in part, a contingent circumstance of my trajectory. For there were, of course, in those years, bold voices exactly making brave statements of commitment—on race, gender, sexual identity, and preference; on the need for new forms of academic practice. And a few years later, the tragedy of 9-11 would produce a pained spasm of “seriousness” among historians and humanist intellectuals more broadly (it saw much commentary that was depressing at the time, and some that, in retrospect, looks actively disastrous). But all I can say is, in the course of my own graduate formation in History, I had been led to focus on the mastery of a large, intricate, and contentious secondary literature, and I had been assiduously tutored in the tournament of anxiety that is life as a neophyte scholar. I had gotten essentially zero sense that *actually deciding what one thought about things*—and stating that clearly—was part of the project. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that I felt actively discouraged from any such enterprise. There was too much to know (too much history, too much historiography) to waste time on such musings. The scholars I admired, and emulated, did not advert to any elaborate “commitments”—beyond knowing history, and *being historians*. They were professional historians. They no more advertised their “personal philosophies” than did my dentist—and, in their professionalism (and appealing humility), they might well have dismissed their own “credos” of no greater depth or importance than that of their own dentists.⁷ But I harbored a (sublated) sense that to be a historian was to be an “intellectual” and that to be an “intellectual” was to have some substantive conception of life that was integral to one’s account of one’s work.⁸ And

⁷ Two clarifications: (1) “intellectuality” aside, these historians were certainly progressively oriented people of integrity, so they were committed to “the truth” and to “decency” in very appealing ways (some would argue, not absurdly, that such conventional forms of good behavior are, in the end, much safer and more valuable than the self-dramatizations of “intellectuals”); (2) while the idea that humanistic scholars have a more pressing obligation to reach, and articulate, a “credo” than a dentist (or anyone else) is easily mocked as mere prejudice, I believe that it is exactly the work of substantive reflection on the good that (at least potentially) exonerates humanists from the eternally encroaching charge of culpable indulgence.

⁸ Where did I get this idea? My father had been a scholar of Sartre, and this probably haloed, for me, some concept of the “intellectual” in the sense I invoke here. My mother’s reverence for thinker-activists like Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and the Berrigan brothers probably reinforced this image

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it was in this context, I think, that I so admired the idea of an effort, by a set of writers and scholars and thinkers, each to commit to paper a *statement of belief*. The specific work of disciplinary life in the university as I had experienced it (in graduate school and after) seemed to militate strongly against such exercises, even as “what one believes” could hardly be said to be unimportant to the doing of that work—and might even be the whole point.⁹

Cl.P16 But even as the idea of “credos” gave me a little thrill, then (and still sort of does), there is very definitely much to be said against such an exercise. This must be acknowledged. For one thing, the ability to bracket—or at least just pipe-down-about—one’s “fundamental beliefs” is, without question, an essential intellectual virtue. There’s a heuristic here (learning to think differently, when that is needed), and a pragmatics, too (not pissing people off, when that is not wanted), and, finally, even something like a *wisdom* (one’s “fundamental” beliefs actually *change*—so composing and publishing credos often proves a fool’s errand; extreme caution is recommended). Not to mention the simple matter of good taste. The whole lugubrious business of pontificating about one’s beliefs can just feel so nakedly *desperate*. And then there is the bombast and logophilia of going to the trouble to *inscribe* one’s commitments. Why bother? Actually living them is probably of greater importance, and manifesting them obliquely (instead of in op-eds) may be preferable under many circumstances.

(from a different direction). Finally, as an undergraduate, I fell under the sway of two very powerful humanistic thinkers (neither of whom was a disciplinary historian): the ruminating Victor Preller (who wrote on Aquinas and Wittgenstein, and had the quiet charisma of a hoary, chain-smoking, god-struck left-iconoclast) and the generous Cornel West (whose large lecture class on “Cultural Criticism” was a touchstone for many of us at Princeton in those years).

⁹ I think it is fair to say that History itself, as a discipline, proved relatively conservative across those years—*methodologically* conservative (in comparison with departments of English and Anthropology, say), and generally more inclined to take refuge behind a kind of flat-footed archival empiricism. While the specification of one’s “subject position” became, of course, increasingly standard across the 1990 and the first decade of the twenty-first century in university humanities departments, History was slow to such avowals, and perpetually restabilized itself by reference to a social-scientific enterprise of positive knowledge-production—as it still does. A further hedge/nuance: I actually did my graduate training in the “History and Philosophy of Science” (at Cambridge), and it is perhaps important to note that the historical study of the sciences has a long-standing preoccupation with epistemological problems, and can be understood, within historical subdisciplines, as particularly obsessed with methodological issues. “Social Construction” was to the fore across the years of my formation, and the fight that would be called the “Science Wars” was in the offing. So were there issues of “creed” and “fundamental commitment” on that table? There were. But my overwhelming sense (was it just me?) was always that these matters were essentially matters of “navigation” within the specific human-cum-institutional landscape of the field—a field in which everyone was trying to “advance.” One took “positions” at professional conferences. And then people went home, where none of the questions seemed to come up. In retrospect, this seems less like hypocrisy (or even “careerism”) than a certain kind of ingrained court-culture characteristic of scholarly life.

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Cl.P17

This last idea has grown on me over the years. In fact, I've spent much of the last decade writing for (and helping edit) a magazine/journal, called *Cabinet*, that was founded on a kind of (oblique) commitment to obliquity. We always preferred the marginal and fragile to the "important" or "fundamental," and we tended to choose the concrete particular (in its concrete particularity) over generalizations, however seemingly profound or wide-ranging. In a spirit I associate with the poet-sage irenics of Michel Serres, we mistrusted the barely sublimated brutality of "critique." We diagnosed conceit and fatuity and posturing in most—possibly all—efforts to scramble to the "middle" of a matter, and I think we fretted how foundations tended to be poured by those who were willing to "clear the ground" (we did not like that; we preferred the ground messy). Synoptic views over vast domains do tend to be achieved by those who sweep (with greater or lesser violence) the people and things of the world into adventitious heaps, which can then be climbed—How else to get those lofty perspectives?

Cl.P18

It is also the case that, just as *Cabinet* has primarily identified itself with the world of art (its making, its makers, the things made in its name), I have given much of my time and attention in the last twenty years to making work, often with others, that wants to be considered within that unsettled space of waylaid teleologies and purposiveness-that-seems-to-defy-clear-purpose. And in that space of "serious play," as I have come to think about it, one must be wary of being too sure one is in command of the "chain of reasons" that might be said to motivate any given decision or element of a work—up from first principles, through to a specific stroke or a verse. Perfect certainty that one knows what one is trying to say and why, when activated in the making of a work of art, often leads to works that might better have taken the form of a declaration. Art that can be reduced to (or replaced by) its "content" is generally called propaganda.

Cl.P19

All of which is to say, I am in many ways these days more comfortable *eliding* first principles than "articulating" them, and I have worked hard and self-consciously, over the last fifteen years in particular, to spend more time straying from foundations than laying them. Actual work is required (by some of us, anyway; those of us with an adolescent appetite for staking positions, those of us bent early to the deforming armature of academic self-assurance) to "tarry with the negative"—to remain with *not* having decided, to stay with *not* knowing, to resist settling into the comfortable stance of having both feet firmly planted on the ground.¹⁰ I have tried to get better at

¹⁰ "Tarry with the negative" is Hegel (from the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*), but I here use it more in the sense of a slogan than in any real invocation of Hegelian thought. In many

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these aspects of thought-life, which are also aspects of life as it operates in spaces other than reflection and ratiocination.

Ci.P20 Wait! Did I do it? Did I just explain the question away? Or reframe it into oblivion?

Ci.P21 Almost. But no. The charge of this edited volume offers a rare challenge: to make explicit some version of what I take to be my deepest commitments; to attempt my own *I believe*.

Ci.P22 So let me try.

* * *

Ci.P23 I believe that it is the basic catastrophe of human being that we are, functionally, little hollow passages for the transmission of pain. Left to our own devices, we work as “stents” of varying dimensions by which pain and suffering can be, in effect, *relocated*. Put pain into us, and we deliver it elsewhere. This is my “anthropology.” Within the language of Christianity, we might say that this condition is what is meant by the strange and difficult doctrine of “original sin.” I take the central work of personhood to be learning ways to defy, arrest, and/or redress this calamitous aspect of our essential beings.¹¹ Because suffering is guaranteed. But its transmission can be arrested.

Ci.P24 I believe that we *know* this. That we all know this deep in our beings.

Ci.P25 Why do I begin from pain and suffering?

Ci.P26 After all, I applaud “thinking positively.” Indeed, I salute positive psychology’s emphasis on tactics and strategies for open, empirical, dynamic, best-practice orientations to life. I have no problem with “happiness.” And, in my starting from suffering, I do not wish to come across as some gaunt Old Testament doomist; tormented ascetic-pain fetishist; or farcical sorrow-mongering existentialist. I am just saying what cannot be denied: we suffer. And then I am also saying something else. Something, again, that I think we all know: some people are able to experience great pain (physical anguish, emotional distress) *without, in turn, becoming a cause of pain*

ways, though, it is perhaps a version of Keats’s notion of “negative capability” that is most on my mind here.

¹¹ On “central”: I do not mean, in any way, “exclusive.” Cultivating the capacity to nurture others, to love, to understand, to appreciate; developing a coherent sense of identity, agency, and responsibility, and the forms of judgment on which those aspect of personhood rely (and which they make possible); learning how to *pay attention to things*, in the world and in the mind—all of this is essential to human flourishing as I conceive it. But I believe that the greatest threat to each of these capacities is “suffering”—the immediate and direct and raw experience of our own physical and psychic pain; the damage resulting from it to ourselves and others; the fear that it engenders; the amplification and continuous redistribution of it and its effect by those who are powerless to arrest its transmission.

to others. But people seem to vary hugely in their capacities in this regard. This feels to me like a luminous mystery of existence. It merits our sustained attention. Whatever resources we have to investigate this dimension of our diversity must be marshalled in the effort to understand what power this is with which some humans are endowed so abundantly—and which others of us seem almost perfectly to lack. This is, for me, the most urgent, the deepest, the highest study. Whatever this power is, it richly deserves to be described with the superlatives our languages afford. For me, this power is “sacred.”¹²

C1.P27

I do not understand it.

C1.P28

I *do* feel my way toward it by means of metaphors. Sometimes it seems to me that what we seek is a kind of “alchemy,” whereby the “base matter” of pain may be actively “transmuted” into the spangled and precious elements of patience, hope, and generosity—transmuted into “love.” At other times I set my sights lower, and my metaphor becomes one of “digestion.” Perhaps the glamour of alchemical transformation outstrips our abilities; perhaps the best we can hope is to train our “digesters” (the term is Melville’s) to take *actual nourishment* from the bitter dish that suffering spoons into our unwilling mouths.¹³ The image is effectively metabolic: Can one learn to derive energy, growth, strength from such nasty fare? I am reminded of the harrowing scene in Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*: the wayward Bud Korpenning, hungry and penniless, shovels coal for a hard-hearted woman on 53rd Street, who rewards him with a plate of rotten food. He chokes it down, and is flushed back into the street, with his sour stomach heaving. But he will not let himself vomit, since he needs the nourishment: “If I lose it, it wont [sic] do me no good,” he says to himself sternly.¹⁴

C1.P29

And then, it is possible to adopt a still more modest hope. Perhaps the best we can do is simply “absorb,” or “neutralize,” or perhaps even simply “store away,” or somehow “hold” the pain that comes into us. Maybe we cannot

¹² In saying this I do not mean to suggest, somehow, that this power is inaccessible to rational inquiry. I merely mean that it seems to me to be essentially, finally, “mysterious”—to be an “orienting” mystery. I cannot imagine this problem being “solved” using the tools of techno-science alone (I think, in fact, that there are technical, philosophical arguments that essentially prove that this problem cannot be “solved,” scientifically). But that said, I *welcome* scientific investigation of this power—neuroscience, social science, *any* science. This is a perfectly interdisciplinary domain. Transdisciplinary. *Super-disciplinary*. If there was ever an “all-hands-on-deck” problem, this would be it.

¹³ In chapter 10 of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael suggests that “philosophy” is the resort of those who cannot manage life: “So soon as I hear that such or such a man gives himself out for a philosopher, I conclude that . . . he must have ‘broken his digester.’”

¹⁴ John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1953 [1925]), p. 60.

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make it work for us. Maybe we cannot turn it into anything useful or good or beautiful. Perhaps the best we can do is *not pass it along*.

Ci.P30 This is what I believe. And believing this informs my work. Meaning here both the “work” of a life—living. And the “work” I actually do as my *work*: my calling as a teacher and scholar and maker. And so, for me, being a historian, a humanist, and a person who tries to make things that can stand with things that get called works of art—all of that is inseparable from this central and most exigent challenge: to learn to become something other than a hollow conduit for pain.

* * *

Ci.P31 A moment, then, on religion. Since, are we not in that realm? Well, yes. We are. I think we are. In my view, religions can be understood as powerful repositories of accumulated technologies and strategies by which groups of human beings have succeeded, across time, in addressing the “central problem” I have given here: the problem of modulating human beings from hollow pain stents (pain in *here*; pain out *there*) into . . . *something else*. This is by no means all that “religions” are. And they are by no means equal, in my view, in their offerings on the central problem as I understand it. But if it is legitimate to speak of “wisdom traditions,” I would define this notion as precisely that set of practices and beliefs, stories and rites, habits and concepts that equip human beings to confront pain—to take it in, to feel and experience it (since, again, simply avoiding it is impossible, and at a certain point a reflexive and dominant need to avoid it can be extremely dangerous)—and to do something *other* than pass it along to others.

Ci.P32 All this is very important to how I think of “the humanities.”

Ci.P33 For me, for better or worse, the humanistic scholarly enterprises only really make sense as thinly (and, I believe, imperfectly) “secularized” efforts to do work once done in explicitly religious settings. This is hardly an original idea. In a basic way, it is a very old-fashioned idea—and one strongly associated with the thinking of the nineteenth-century French thinker August Comte.

Ci.P34 The founder of the philosophy of “positivism,” and one of the so-called prophets of Paris who worked at the long problem of trying to “end” the (sort-of-endless) French Revolution, Comte came to think only science could save us from our exceedingly messy and delusional ways of understanding things. Sketching one of those broad-brush “histories” of humanity (a go-to activity of all the early social scientists), he divided civilizational progress into three phases: at first, people tended to *personify* the forces that appeared to

govern their fates, and so they conjured various anthropomorphic deities, ascribed to them a host of powers, and made humanity answerable to their diktats. This was Comte's "phase one." He called it the "Theological" phase. These gods are illusions, of course. And eventually, according to Comte, this becomes impossible to ignore. People sort of "grow up." They drop the Santa Claus routine. And they chuck Yahweh, Vishnu, Zeus, and all the little godlets. But, as Comte saw it, they don't drop the sense that the cosmos is "governed" by "forces"—powers, principles, concepts. There may not be a "Venus," but there is "love." There might not be a "Jupiter," but there is "justice." In a basic way, Comte thought those sorts of *abstractions* were, in effect, just gods without faces. They were no more "real" than gnomes. And, therefore, it was a pretty much a waste of time to discuss them, and a form of *madness* to try to organize individual or social life around them. Nevertheless, the historical phase of human existence in which people worked from such abstractions was a modest improvement over personified deities: Comte called it the "Metaphysical" phase, and he thought of those abstractions as "metaphysical."

Cl.P35

He believed that his own time remained mired in a "metaphysical" orientation to the problems of existence—particularly political existence. And that was the problem. People arguing about "ideas" (like "liberty") that were basically will-o'-wisp led to nonstop fighting. This was why Comte encouraged everyone to step forward with him, and with all true rationalist-empiricists, into the brave new world of "phase 3," which he called the "Positive" phase (hence, his philosophy of "Positivism"). In this final phase of human maturity, only things that could be counted and measured would be discussed. You want "liberty"? This is an abstraction. But "buying power"—*that* is concrete. You are "free" to buy whatever you can afford. What does it mean to be "free" to buy a Maserati if you can't afford it? It doesn't mean anything. It's *nonsense*. What was "liberty" if you had to work all day not to die of starvation? Meaningless! How many calories are available to each citizen? That is real, can be computed, and establishes the basic framework of daily life. A bill of "rights," by contrast, is like the *tooth fairy*: a cool concept but also an infantile, illusory *fiction*. In the world Comte envisioned, you could dispense with political theorists—because they would be replaced by economists. Interestingly, this is, in fact, pretty much what has happened: practically speaking, the folks who calculate GDP are a *lot* more important to twenty-first-century geopolitics than people who teach Hannah Arendt; the former are our transnational plutocratic clerisy, the latter mostly unemployed.

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Ct.P36

Why go through all this?

Ct.P37

Well, despite my having, personally, very little enthusiasm for Comte's schema, I do think he got some things basically right—including the way that many of our most familiar concepts and projects are really best understood as lightly de-theologized abstractions. Or, as he would have it, “metaphysical” versions of activities that originally took shape in the language of the gods. Take two important examples: “art” and “the humanities.”

Ct.P38

But before we dig in on that, we should take a quick detour into some troubling context. After all, it is necessary to call out, and decry, the highly problematic nineteenth-century (racist, colonial, sexist) matrix out of which the Comtean template for human “evolution”/“progress” emerged. Comte's trinitarian, stadial architecture was as much a battle cry for a techno-rational reductivism (anticlerical, mathematical, analytic) as it was an effort to describe the motor of historical change across the globe. His system was meant to explain both why Christianity was doomed and why all the various non-Western spiritual traditions ought properly to be extirpated in the name of moving humanity *forward*—forward to a brighter destiny where the problems of individual and social life would be solved by means of *calculations on data* rather than *seances with phantoms* (or, for that matter, philosophical bloviation, which was, in his view, really little better than those seances, in the end).

Ct.P39

So all of that is/was very, very unfortunate. And it gives any “Comte”-style analysis a bit of bad odor. Moreover, as aficionados of Comtean thought will know, Comte's own efforts to realize his vision as a politics actually led him to conjure, later in life, a totally extravagant and seemingly perverse vision of society reorganized around a ton of neo-ecclesiastical pageantry—all in the name of the “Positive.” Imagine elaborate parades, and costumes, and ritual “holy days” of calculus, and a bunch of other very strange proposals. Not really where you thought he was going to go when he launched on a call for a refreshingly “rational” focus on exclusively nuts-and-bolts elements of existence. The weirdness of where he ends up can hardly be overstated.

Ct.P40

But despite all this, I can't deny it: I think Comte put his finger on some very important dynamics in Western intellectual life over the last half-millennium. In practice, personified theological enterprises *have indeed* given way to metaphysical instantiations of broadly homologous form. Given time, and enough engineers (and economists), the “metaphysical” elements of these systems tend to fall away (or come to be redescribed statistically or quantitatively), and we are left with a world that feels largely amenable to

a kind of problem solving that, it turns out, machines do very well. We are speaking here at a very high level of generality, but it wouldn't be wrong, I think, to say that the increasing penetration into social and subjective existence of algorithmic mechanisms structuring (and in more and more cases actually *making*) our choices represents a predictable unfolding of the logic of Comtean Positivism. That all of this is, from my perspective, “wrong” at the deepest level (wrong about what is “most real,” that is; I myself actually think the gods are down there, under it all), doesn't mean that it isn't *exactly right*, descriptively.

C1.P41

Bracket the larger implications. Let's put aside, for now, what I take to be a remarkable, ongoing, reductivist-Postivist acceleration in our time. Let's put aside the mutually reinforcing cycles of monetization, financialization, and calculation that are, in my view, primary drivers of this dynamic. Put aside the disaster that is the accelerating push-down of calculable “positivist” values (like “wealth”) into the spaces of “metaphysical” values (like “the good”). For now, I propose to stay for another moment with that earlier Comtean hinge: not the one by which abstractions like “justice” give way to an empirical flurry of metrics, indices, and quantification (see “Law and Economics”); but rather the one by which god-happy theological systems swing into depersonalized metaphysics. It is my view that only this historico-conceptual translation permits us to make sense of the whole enterprise of “the humanities” as an ongoing enterprise.¹⁵

C1.P42

Yes, of course: the history of the humanities (as an evolution out of the more-or-less self-conscious Renaissance program of “humanism”; as an administrative designation within the modern liberal arts college and research university) is complex. There are many stories to be told. But I don't think it is wrong to say that the coherence of the enterprises gathered under the rubric of “the humanities” in our time (the practice of secular hermeneutics on texts understood to be without meaningful/accessible divine “content”; the labor of interpretive historicism; the whole set of activities that use language to engage and analyze those aspects of human experience that appear to elude the ever-expanding toolkit of medicine, biology, and the adjacent social sciences) is *inconceivable* absent a development much like the one Comte invokes. This is to say: a group of theological enterprises that have long aimed at accessing transcendent grounds for being (projects that have been

¹⁵ Assuming, that is, that it should indeed be understood as an ongoing enterprise; and this is not entirely clear. I open this point later on.

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predicated on interpretive means by which to access meaning and purpose; enterprises that have developed, preserved, and taught various practices for addressing how-to-live and what-to-do questions) *actually did give way* to a set of secular projects that have tried to do much the same work, using many of the same techniques.

C1.P43 Why am I saying all this? I am rehearsing this account of the humanistic enterprise because, despite it being somewhat hackneyed, and despite there being a number of substantial critiques of its historical accuracy and normative relevance, *I basically believe* that the modern humanities really are a metaphysical reinscription of a theological enterprise.¹⁶ Working from this commitment, I attempt to practice them—to *do* humanistic work; to write and research and teach history (and the pursuit of “historical consciousness”) as a historian—in a way that is faithful to my understanding of their nature.

C1.P44 It feels important to say, immediately, that I think this is a pretty quixotic enterprise. It is extremely difficult to persuade oneself (much less anyone else) that, say, the work of a practicing professional historian genuinely hews to these high aspirations. Let’s take some of my own academic work as an especially invidious counterexample: *In what possible way could an 815-page book on the history of cetacean biology be said to speak to the questions of how to live and what to do?*

C1.P45 The truth is, I would like to believe I could *almost* answer that question. But a book like that one (*The Sounding of the Whale*, University of Chicago Press, 2012) is also a compromise between my churning aspiration to *do history as humanistic work* (in the deep sense I have tried to invoke earlier) and a relatively stringent series of formal disciplinary conventions and expectations that govern membership in the guild, and determine one’s fate within the modern university. I would say that each of my books and each of my articles represents a more or less strained effort to satisfy these latter conditions without wholly disregarding (or even betraying) the former. The details of how that process played out, project by project, would amount to

¹⁶ I will go further, and say that I do not think that they really make much sense absent this genealogical understanding. The taxonomy that holds together the study of literature and language, history (at least some part of it), art and music (though not as practical arts), and philosophy (at least the part of it that is frank about, and interested in, its historicity), but excludes anthropology, sociology, biology, etc. can readily be shown to be conceptually incoherent in several different ways. We have “the humanities” as a division of university life because, across the nineteenth century, learned culture in metropolitan Europe began to seek, in secular artifacts, forms of “soulcraft” once reserved for religious institutions and practices. The new cultural and intellectual enterprises that resulted were installed in pedagogical institutions as part of a larger program of reforms of the relationship between church and state.

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a very fine-grained intellectual autobiography—one that you don't want to read, one that I don't think I would want to try and write, and one that *I am absolutely sure* is not what is being asked of me here.

* * *

Ci.P46

But I hope all of this makes clear that the question at stake in this volume—the question of the relationship between “history and human flourishing”—is, for me, *the big one*. Since I am very definitely someone who thought of the commitment to humanistic history as a “form of life”—as a *vocation* in a “metaphysical,” pre-Weberian sense.¹⁷ Which is to say, I believe I got into this activity not as a “knowledge-producing day job,” not as a “profession,” but as a *calling*; not as a way to “make a living” (so I could have some sort of life), but as a way to work on figuring out (as a form of life) what could be hoped for *as a form of life*. I became a historian out of a sense that the study of the past (its texts and persons, its patterns and artifacts) would help me understand and pursue “human flourishing”—even help me *flourish as a human*, and, I hoped, equip me to assist others in doing likewise.

* * *

Ci.P47

It is embarrassing to confess such ambitions. It is hard to say whether what is more embarrassing is the hubris of the aspirations themselves or the pratfall failures to achieve them. Something of a toss-up. But I am not failing these aspirations alone.

Ci.P48

I am reminded of a painful exchange in a particularly intense graduate seminar a few years ago. If I remember correctly, we were down in the thick of a difficult conversation about the work of Fred Moten (the much-discussed African American theorist, poet, and critic), and specifically on his challenging notion of the “freedom to refuse.” Somewhere in there I said something (probably a little careless; probably inadequately hedged) about

¹⁷ I am referring here to Max Weber's important 1918 lecture/essay *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, which comes into English as “Science as a Vocation.” This is an exceedingly rich and historically specific text, the reception history of which is a subject in its own right. But it will not be false to its contents to say that Weber insists upon the enterprise of dedicated, disciplined “knowledge-production” (the seeking, testing, and conveying of positive knowledge) as the “vocation” of university scholarship. He is definitive that this work leaves no room for the (very real; even urgent—he acknowledges) problems of “meaning” or “value” in human life. The problems may be real, but university professors have no special claim on them, and Weber is caustically dismissive of any residual conception of the university that trades on the promise that academic study will address such matters—which, in his view, it absolutely cannot (and *must* not). It is exactly a reconstruction of the humanistic domain on Weberian “scientistic” grounds that has, in my view, substantially deprived that domain of its primary reason for being and rendered it increasingly impossible to defend in contemporary life.

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the humanities and the traditions of *Bildung*—something that probably made it sound like I believed (as I have just confessed, earlier, that I do; however shamefacedly, however hesitantly) that scholars in the humanities, as the custodians of a fragile and powerful legacy of masterworks, ought to be answerable on existential questions. And all of a sudden, a brilliant student to my right fairly *exploded* on me—launching into an anecdote twisted tight with righteous indignation. She had recently visited her sister, who was completing medical school, and spent several days with her among the doctors and the hospital work. You might think, the student pointed out, that with all that soulless science, and all that bourgeois professionalism of doctors-to-be, and all the egomania of wealthy surgeons and med-school professors, that one would find callow sensibilities and a want of sensitivity, soul, and all the stuff that humanists like you (meaning me) pride themselves at being all about. *However*, she went on acidly, in comparing their respective post-secondary experiences, she and her sister discovered that the med-school professoriate *wildly excelled* the humanities faculty in *every index of actual “human” decency*. Indeed, she wanted to go further: the idea that the group of narcissistic, neurotic, misogynist-solipsists gathered together as “full professors of the humanities” that she had thus far encountered were to be “custodians” of any human virtues, or teachers of the same, was *perfectly ludicrous*—GROTESQUE! No, *INSANE!*

Cl.P49 This was a depressing thing to hear. And it was still more depressing to feel like I couldn’t really argue with her. So let’s pause there. Simply for a moment of head-hung silence. (Pause here—for real; if you are someone who cares about the humanities, about history as a humanistic enterprise, look up from the page and think about the disaster; return in a minute or so—my essay will still be here.)

Cl.P50 What can be said? Well, what occurs to me is to recall that it was also the case that Kierkegaard, surveying Christendom in his day, couldn’t find a “Christian.” And Socrates, surveying learned Athens in his, couldn’t find anyone who seemed a true “lover of wisdom.” In both cases, the pointing up of the gigantic gulf between the promise (of these grand projects) and their hapless traducing was a *call to a higher ideal than had yet been realized*. What was being sought was a *deeper understanding of the commitments that were being avowed* (without adequately careful scrutiny). And this is, I think, where we are: in that straining space that glows green with irony—the green of bitterness, and the green of hope, superimposed.

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Cl.P51

That student deserved—all our students deserve—*better*. Better from us. Better from the world of university scholarship in arts and letters. Better from the humanities. And if we cannot do better, then I am not sure that the university humanities in their current form are really much worth preserving. Because however impressive I find our amassed scholarship, I do not think that our enterprise is, at its core and at its crown, about merely “producing knowledge” concerning the objects of humanistic inquiry.¹⁸ I think it is about working with those objects, and knowledge about them, *in order to become better humans*. Our aim must be more life, lived better, by more people. When our work fails this objective (when it cannot be shown to connect, or be connectable, to that objective), our work *fails*.

* * *

Cl.P52

And our work is failing. Diagnosing causes is difficult. There are many. History teaches many things, but one of the most basic is simply that historical change is complex. So “explaining” how anything got to be the way it is will be *complicated*. Moreover, as a practicing historian, I tend to be basically wary of causal/explanatory history—not because I think it is impossible or invidious, exactly, but because I think there is plenty of work to be done in a different key: the form of historical inquiry I associate with Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of recovery.”¹⁹ Which is to say, I feel that there is basically an infinite amount of history to be done that works to *recover human experiences* (i.e., to resurrect and translate their immediacy), and that, on balance, this work does more good in the world (is more *needed*) than more history that tries to assign blame for various things—which is basically what causal/explanatory history always finds itself doing, in the end.²⁰ But here, let me

¹⁸ But again, let me be clear: it is not that I think “producing knowledge concerning the objects of humanistic inquiry” is a *bad thing*. On the contrary, I think it is a “good thing.” But it is a pretty “small” good thing, in the greater scheme of things. It is not a sufficiently rich, ample, or socially significant activity, taken in itself, to authorize the cultural role many humanists imagine their enterprise merits—or indeed that it has been granted within higher education for more than a century.

¹⁹ For readers of Ricoeur, I should acknowledge that I am using his terminology in a way that departs, to a degree, from his usage. His “hermeneutics of suspicion” does not map cleanly onto “explanatory history” as I invoke it here, and his concept of “recovery” does not align exactly with what historians tend to mean by “recovery.”

²⁰ Although, as earlier, it is not that I think explanatory history is “bad.” On the contrary, it is essential in many ways. It is just that it is not so much my thing—and I am often surprised by how little attention is paid to alternatives. My own view is that this overemphasis on explanation in historical practice is tied up with the relentless “scientism” of the field—an impatience concerning the slow work of walking with the dead, a nervousness about the aesthetic/artistic/“writerly” aspects of such work, an unseemly preference for “covering claims” and pseudo-judicial “arguments” over the delicate and essentially “weak” work of giving time to those who are no more (Maya Jasanoff speaks to some of this in her contribution to this volume). There is also the invidious way that the humanities

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put aside my biases against historical forensics and/or prosecution, and try to say a few things about why we are failing: why humanistic teaching and learning on campus is falling so short of what is wanted, of what is needed, of what can legitimately be asked of us (by our students, by our country, by the world, by ourselves).

Ca.P53

Without disregarding the failures of individuals (our various individual failures to rise to our calling), I think it is fair to say that the causes are, in large measure, *structural*—and they have much to do with the changing character of higher education in the United States over the last forty years. Aspects of both graduate and undergraduate formation are at issue. For undergraduates and their families, the intensifications of the increasingly “efficient” neoliberal labor market (along with rising educational costs) have up-ticked pressure on a set of perennial cost/benefit calculations around higher education and made it more difficult to conceive of much (if any) time at university as dedicated to “soulcraft.” At least not actual *instructional hours*, which are increasingly seen as better reserved for the straightforward acquisition of skills, or for positioning oneself with the recommenders and mentors who can advance the internships and connections necessary for transition to nonpenurious employment. Soulcraft is, at best, an extracurricular activity—dominated by athletics and various other social/community aspects of campus life.²¹ An increasingly supine (decreasingly covert?) worship of commercial and financial success, together with the high-stakes, tournament-like demands of “startup culture,” have significantly undermined the very idea that the formation of a “character” is a coherent objective; or anyway a project anyone can afford to undertake, given all the other things that are urgently required if one hopes to gain (or just retain) a place in the economy—an economy where precarity holds the whip (and the distance between winners and losers widens harrowingly). Self-regulation is needed for success, to be sure—everyone will tell you that. But some mixture

in colleges and universities have been increasingly assimilated into, effectively, “pre-law” programs—and university “writing programs” (the non-creative-writing-“freshman-comp” kind of writing programs) have privileged prose forms modeled on the legal brief. In this context students, too, have a hypertrophied sense of argumentation “as” thought. But this is *not correct*. Indeed, the best humanistic work frequently eschews argument, or activates its modes sparingly. In my own view, when doing “humanistic” history of the sort I care about, arguments and explanations both must *serve* the work of recovery, and not vice versa. “Using” dead people to make arguments always smacks of the vampire.

²¹ Not entirely unreasonably, in my view. Since, however shameful this should be for humanities professors, many aspects of self-formation and relation to others are not, it seems to me, taught *worse* in various gyms and on various playing fields than in plenty of English or History departments.

of therapy, medication, and meritophilic grit/determination is a workable stopgap (at least), and may even suffice, pragmatically. Some students still have religious structures or commitments in their lives, and in my experience these students tend (counterintuitively?) to have *more* patience for the idea that secular projects of inquiry can meaningfully engage existential questions. But they also have, in a sense, less immediate need for whatever those secular traditions might offer. Combine all this with the fact that a relatively small percentage of humanist faculty are anyway even willing to represent their work as explicitly and effectively engaged with human flourishing, and one can readily see why the undergraduates who are interested in such questions (and sufficiently “privileged” and/or “desperate” to pursue them) drift toward psychology. There, the runaway success of introductory courses in positive psychology and practical happiness and (sometimes in adjacent departments) “life design” index the continuing hunger, among students, for thoughtful engagement with central questions of “how to live” and “what to do.” But the humanists are seldom at the helm in those classes. And, of course, many of those giant courses are full of students who will ultimately (like an increasing percentage of their classmates) focus on pursuing degrees that optimize their odds of surviving a more and more unforgiving, even brutal, labor market.

Ct.P54

I have claimed that relatively few of the humanistic faculty frame their subjects (and courses) as explicitly engaged with those “how to live” and “what to do” questions. To understand why this should be so requires, I think, that we look at graduate education—for it is in those crucial years of apprenticeship that ambitious young students of history and literature and art are acculturated to the professoriate (despite the fact that many of them will never actually accede to professorial life—a problem not unrelated, of course, to the waning status of humanistic learning on campus). My basic intuition is that, in fact, many many of those ambitious young students *do* believe, when they choose to apply to graduate school in the humanities, that the work they will do there will directly engage questions of how to live and what to do. I think that *almost all of them* believe, deep in their hearts, that the objects to which humanistic scholars address themselves do indeed bear directly on the problems of human flourishing. They must feel this, since it would be *inconceivable* that they would decide to pursue a PhD in the humanities in the hopes of getting a “good job”—of, somehow, making their way in a promising “profession.” Given the career-placement statistics for humanists with doctoral degrees, that would be completely crazy.

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Cl.P55

So, at the outset, anyway, they *believe* in the “existential” import of the activities to which they have decided to dedicate five, six, seven, eight years. But across those years, the years of actual graduate training, what occurs significantly compromises, by and large, that belief, and, in my view, seriously *undermines* their ability to activate those commitments. This process is called “professionalization.” And it involves acculturation in one or another of the humanistic “fields” as they are currently practiced in research universities. And these enterprises have now been trapped in accelerating arms races of hyperspecialized “technical” scholarship for decades. As a result, what is required to rise to the top of these domains—and only those who rise to the *very* top have a chance of securing anything like real employment in the academy, and this has been the case for decades; which has, in fact, amplified these dynamics now across several generations—is now a daunting kind of *relentless productivity*, governed by the peculiar “social technology” of peer review (itself borrowed, of course, from the natural sciences). The net effect is that a young scholar who hopes to survive the bootcamp gauntlet of graduate school (and then, with luck, a postdoc, and then, with even more luck, six years as junior faculty at a functional institution of higher learning) must *at all cost* learn, and master, a set of relatively simple, if hugely demanding, techniques by which productively to arbitrage various adventitious “opportunities” in a very crowded, and, in general, fairly mercenary (because of the deranging competitive pressures), subdisciplinary landscape.

Cl.P56

This is, for many, a profoundly damaging experience. And that is completely understandable. It is a huge amount of work, and, despite the passion, dedication, and intelligence of those who do it, the professionalizing disciplinary matrices *nearly guarantee* that the results will be neither interesting, nor important, nor beautiful. Exceptions are rare (if wonderful). Sometimes, of course, they are actually punished. Those who do not succeed at interpolating themselves into this perverse enterprise are not infrequently (and not unreasonably) embittered by the whole experience. And those who *do* succeed tend to be significantly deformed by it. What is certain is that the exigencies of such a regime make very poor training for the project of humanistic endeavor as I have tried to sketch it—the real work of activating the human past (its people and the things they made and did; the form of consciousness that arises in the process of becoming inward with interpretive inquiry and historical change) in an effort to live better and help others do the same.

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Ci.P57 Do some of the survivors of graduate school “keep the faith” with which they turned to the pursuit of a PhD? Absolutely. And there are many extraordinary and gifted and passionate scholar-teachers in the humanities in the colleges and universities of the United States and elsewhere (I am myself, of course, the product of this world, and deeply grateful for the beauty and friendship I have found there). But those special folk have emerged and hold space largely *despite* our current system of graduate education, not because of it.

Ci.P58 All of this will be very hard to change. Because everyone who makes the system work has seen their interests in it fully “vest.” And as anyone who has spent time down in the workings of universities will know, they are not easy places to make new or different things happen.

Ci.P59 Then again, the status quo looks unlikely to endure.

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Ci.P60 I began writing this essay three months ago, in late February of 2020. It is now early June. In the interval, much has changed: the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing, more than 100,000 deaths in the United States, economic catastrophe; not-unrelated social unrest has now generated curfew conditions in many American cities. Here in New York City, we are presently not allowed out after 8 pm, and police helicopters float over Harlem and the Bronx. University life, school life, ordinary life—all of this has been suspended, and there are many uncertainties before this nation, and the globe.

Ci.P61 Inevitably, that paragraph will date this essay in a particular way. But it is the central proposition of history that every document, every object, is essentially, fundamentally “dated.” Each one comes from its moment, and whatever else it says, it very definitely “says” that. Hence, to read a text historically is to read it for what it says “about” that (mostly despite itself). My own text, then, is “dated” in this sense quite regardless of its allusions to current events. There is, however, a convergence, I would argue, between the “Chronos” and the “Kairos” of this essay—between, that is, the efforts of the paragraphs herein to sketch the *historical unfolding* of the university situation of the humanities and the devastating “moment” in which I am now writing. After all, the shocking events of these last weeks have already gone a long way toward precipitating exactly the kind of “crisis” to which I was alluding back several months ago when I wrote the sentence, “the status quo looks unlikely to endure.”

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Ci.P62 To be sure, there are many crises right now, but one of them is happening in the universities, among the graduate students in the humanities (and their teachers). All of us who are healthy and able are quite suddenly reckoning, in newly strained and even desperate ways, with the basic fact that there are *no jobs*—and that it looks like there will be no jobs for quite some time. That market was already very sickly. And now it appears truly dead. “Town Hall” and faculty meetings (all virtual, of course—with all of us holed up for months now, and scrambling to learn new ways to teach and talk in the newly ubiquitous online platforms) are centering on emergency measures and stopgap solutions. We are cutting back new graduate fellowships to free up resources to float a cohort of doctoral candidates who face prospects not seen since the Great Depression, nearly a century ago. Over all those conversations, however, hangs an air of recognition: this is not some temporary challenge; this is a “new normal.” There is every reason to think that the dynamics now at play will enormously hasten changes we already saw on the horizon: further shrinkage of institutional support for, and student interest in, the humanistic domains of the university. It feels “over.” The mood among those who face real insecurity is one of calamity and despair, punctuated by quiet lulls of resignation. Senior faculty and foundation types and university administrators are scrambling—but paths forward have not yet emerged.

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Ci.P63 They must. And it is my hope that this crisis can mark a turning point—and the birth of something new. This is the moment for exactly the kind of reinvention of university humanistic endeavor that is desperately needed: a new effort to animate what is best in what we can do, with the best of what we have, for the most urgent of needs. We need a new generation of humanistic “pathfinders,” willing to come to graduate school in the understanding that they will need to go forth and *create* the new world in which the work we care about can keep happening, since the current forms are passing. We need historical inquiry that understands itself to be an essential part of human flourishing, *and that actually is*.

* * *

Ci.P64 So what would it look like? We have come this far, and I suppose I still have yet to say anything real in response to the central question. So let me try, with the haste Nietzsche recommends for getting into (and out of) big ideas—which, he says, are like cold baths (leap in, and then leap out).

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1. The history we need now, the history that conduces to human flourishing as I understand it, *enacts and teaches sustained attention*. I take the formation of “persons capable of paying attention” to lie close to the heart of education itself.²² I think that unprecedented forces currently militate against the formation of the attentional subject—with perilous implications. In this context, history—like all the humanities—must cultivate, model, and perform modes of sustained attention. To wait with our objects—to give them attention—is to permit the unfolding of the elaborate manifold of relations that both implicate and explicate. No meaningful intelligence, no meaningful political subjectivity, no human decency is possible without the capacity to give this form of attention. But the intensifying dynamics of digital hypercapitalism actively work to subvert and suborn this capacity. By “staying with” our objects, and permitting them to disclose their long reach, historians can offer powerful examples of what happens when attention works on the world.

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2. The history we need now, the history that conduces to human flourishing as I understand it, must teach us to *understand our moment*. The point of learning to read a primary source is to *learn to see time in an object*—to see a time, another time, another world. While this is a good in itself (for what it teaches about attention, for what it may disclose about the reality of change, for what it may offer as actionable resources in the contest with despair and pain), it is also an apprenticeship in the work of critical understanding. It should be the objective of a training in history to acquire the ability to see the texts and objects of one’s own moment as the “primary sources” of the future. Which is to say, the critical/emancipatory power of history lies in *learning to see a time from elsewhere*—a skill that achieves its crowning importance when we can see ourselves and our own time “as it will be seen.” It is here that the true study of history is ultimately a passion for our own moment—and for what must be *different* about our world. Another way of putting this would be as follows: teaching history is important; but teaching *historical consciousness* is no less essential (and it isn’t the same thing).²³

²² The best statement I know of this view is Bernard Stiegler’s *Taking Care of the Youth and the Generations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010 [original French in 2008]). My own work in this area centers on the collective known as “The Friends of Attention.” See D. Graham Burnett and Stevie Knauss, eds., *Twelve Theses on Attention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

²³ I have not used the bulky formulation that is used to translate Gadamer’s *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* (“historically effected consciousness”), but this is what I have in mind here.

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3. And, finally, and most importantly, the history we need now, the history that conduces to human flourishing as I understand it, must teach us *what is eternal*. This may sound daft, but I mean it. The ultimate point of history, as far as I am concerned, is as a kind of elaborate apophatics by which to grasp that which defies time. In this sense, every act of faithful historicism is, in my view, an effort to push the trans-historical to the surface—from underneath. A simple example will suffice. To call something a “work of art” is to assert that a given object somehow exceeds its status as a “mere” historical artifact. Which is to say, historicizing works of art amounts to an effort to articulate everything about them *except* those aspects by which they, somehow, defy their temporality and “speak beyond their time.” To be an “art historian” is to look at (and for) works of art with tools that surface them “obversely”: what the art historian in fact *cannot* actually handle is precisely the “art” part of such objects; where the object will not be historicized (without remainder), exactly *there* we are in the presence of a work of art.²⁴ There are other things that defy time. And they are, of course, the gnomic (anti)-objects of historical inquiry. When history surfaces them, when history permits them to be glimpsed at the surface of time (history cannot do better than that, for they will not come into our temporal atmosphere), history affords momentary apparitions of what might redeem us—beauty, truth, love. These are our best hope against the demons of sorrow and pain.

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Acknowledgments

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I would like to thank a number of readers and critical audiences who helped me refine this essay, in particular: Anthony Acciavatti, Joshua Bauchner, Jonathon Catlin, Dorothea Debus, Jeff Dolven, Simon During, Alyssa Loh, Justin E. H. Smith, Ohad Reiss Sorokin, and the Behrman Fellows at Princeton University. My parents, David Burnett and Claire Gaudiani (scholars both), graciously offered me their perspective on the piece. Darrin McMahon and his editorial readers provided invaluable feedback on an

²⁴ This is the subject of an edited volume on which I have collaborated recently: D. Graham Burnett, Justin E. H. Smith, and Catherine L. Hansen, eds., *In Search of the Third Bird: Exemplary Essays from The Proceedings of ESTAR(SER), 2001–2021* (London: Strange Attractor, 2021).

earlier draft. My special appreciation goes always to Anthony Grafton, from whom I have learned so much over the years.

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