

Itinerant Humanities:
Learning from James Joyce's Voluntary Exile

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The 35th LaFollette Lecture
October 3, 2014

www.wabash.edu/lafollette

The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

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PREFERRED CITATION

Szczeszak-Brewer, Agata, "Itinerant Humanities: Learning from James Joyce's Voluntary Exile." *The Charles D. LaFollette Lectures Series* (2014) :
<<http://www.wabash.edu/lafollette/szczeszak-brewer 2014/>>

EXCERPT

Exile and nomadism, those unsettling symptoms of Modernist physical and spiritual displacement, *can* furnish us with love—love for discovery, love for learning, love for the other. It is through leaving the comfort of home and encountering alien worlds, people, and ideas that the humanities classroom thrives. We expect our students to enter the world of the unknown with courage, but we are hesitant to do it ourselves. We should have the courage to face the new collectively as a discipline, despite the potential dangers.

The LaFollette Lecture Series was established by the Wabash College Board of Trustees to honor Charles D. LaFollette, their longtime colleague on the Board. The lecture is given each year by a Wabash College Faculty member who is charged to address the relation of his or her special discipline to the humanities broadly conceived.

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The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

Itinerant Humanities: Learning from James Joyce's Voluntary Exile

Agata Szczeszak-Brewer
Department of English

Departures are stressful affairs.



In 1904, James Joyce, an Irish Modernist writer, and Nora Barnacle, his girlfriend, embarked on a ferry that would take this unmarried couple on a life-long pilgrimage through Europe. They had just met, a few months before—she a hotel maid from Galway, he a Jesuit-educated young man with poor eyesight and an ambition to become a famous writer.



Joyce must have known he'd never come back home for good. He didn't deceive Nora when he predicted in one of his letters the discomfort of their upcoming elopement and their life in exile. In the letter, he thanked her for choosing "to stand beside me in this way

in my hazardous life” (*Nora* 43). In another letter, he confessed that he could not “enter the social order except as a vagabond” (*Nora* 39).

Departures are stressful affairs when we’re not quite sure where it is we are heading, but I dare say they are even more taxing when travelers have none of James Joyce’s genius and self-confidence. Twelve years ago, on a steamy August day, I sat in an air-conditioned Boeing at the Warsaw Chopin airport, waiting for my migration west to begin. Until then I was too scared to fly. When I traveled to other countries, I took a bus or a train. But there was no train that could take me to North America from the lake district in North-Eastern Poland, where I lived for over two decades until I won a scholarship that sent me to South Carolina.

What did I learn when the plane finally took off and carried me rather turbulently over the Atlantic Ocean? I learned that I, indeed, hated flying. Up in the air, the connection between my muscles and my brain seemed severed. When a flight attendant held a plastic cup with a fizzy drink right in front of my face, I could not extend my arm to grab it. I do not recall talking to anyone or watching an in-flight entertainment program. I do recall a peculiar sensation in my guts, as if someone grabbed my intestines and squeezed them tight. And when I landed safely in Columbia, South Carolina, and opened the door to my new apartment to discover a flying, hissing cockroach the size of my fist, I questioned my decision to leave the comfort of home. I promised myself that in two years, when I was supposed to return to Poland, I would go on a cargo ship instead of a plane.

But, only four months later, I found myself on a plane—again, paralyzed with fear—again, questioning my judgment, when I flew to a conference in London. Then to Mexico City. Then to Montreal. And—always—back home, to Poland, however briefly, to see my family and devour cabbage and dough.

Perhaps this is why, as I began my doctoral studies in literature, I decided to focus on two itinerant writers, two voluntary exiles: James Joyce and Joseph Conrad. Perhaps this is why I was also attracted to other vagabond authors, like Katherine Mansfield, Zoë Wicomb, Eavan Boland, J.M. Coetzee, and Salman Rushdie. I found the nomadic lives of these authors and their characters appealing. They leave home, disillusioned by the constraints of their native cultures, propelled by the desire to encounter the new and to grow. They always remember where they come from, and their writing is suffused with their native cultures, but they keep on moving, propelled by the desire to encounter the new and to leave the familiar constraints of home behind. And in the midst of the debate about the so-called crisis of the humanities, I want my entire academic field to draw inspiration from authors like Joyce, Mansfield, or Rushdie. Without dismissing the very real financial crisis in humanities departments, especially those at public institutions, I want to address another kind of crisis—not entirely unrelated to funding—the crisis of identity of the entire field.

But I will talk about James Joyce first, and you will eventually see that his life and writing *can* give us some direction to re-envision the humanities as a field. A sense of personal crisis and disillusionment compelled young Joyce (and many other expat Modernists) away from his home country.



He was born and educated in Ireland. He rejected formalized religion and the insular culture of turn-of-the-century Dublin. Yet he remained saturated with both religion and Dublin and explored them in his writing until he died. Joyce's personal pilgrimage through Dublin, Paris, Trieste, Pola, Rome, and Zurich influenced his portrayal of Leopold Bloom's and Stephen Dedalus's restlessness. So did his disenchantment with Dublin's factionalism and with what he perceived to be the stifling limitations imposed by the Catholic Church, by England, and by his destitute and rowdy father.

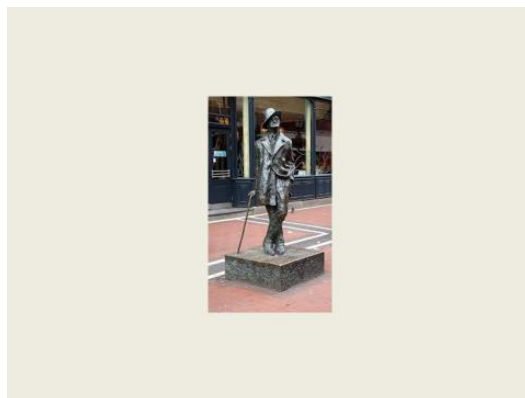


In the country whose citizens were either Catholic or Protestant, pro-Union or anti-Union, pro-Treaty or anti-Treaty, pro-Parnell or anti-Parnell, there seemed to be no niche for those who acknowledged plurality and diversity, who chose to explore their identities rather than

blindly follow ideologies, who realized that succumbing to limitations imposed by society and politics equaled spiritual and artistic death. Joyce's personal and aesthetic rebellion becomes clear when he openly admits to his inability to create freely amid the restraints of his country. He refers to his itinerant life as "voluntary exile" (56). In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce's alter-ego, Stephen Dedalus, says: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning" (*Portrait* 281). Stephen's (and Joyce's) self-exile to "distant nations" is the first step to fulfilling his pledge "to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (288).

The arrogance and danger of such desires are suggested in the fiery sermon in *A Portrait*, when Father Arnall tells the schoolboys about Lucifer and his "sin of pride, the sinful thought conceived in an instant: *non serviam: I will not serve.*" Father Arnall warns the boys that this moment was Lucifer's "ruin" (133). Stephen will repeat the words of Lucifer several times in *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*, and he will insist that this denial is the requisite step towards self-knowledge and freedom indispensable in the process of creation.

Exile furnished Joyce, Stephen's creator, with a sense of dejection and ostracism. These, in turn, provided inspiration and necessary distance from the familiar, a detachment which many creative writers consider invaluable in the process of capturing the complexities of fictional settings. Czesław Miłosz once remarked that an "immigrant will often, for motives of self-defence, cut himself off completely from his land of origin or show toward it a friendly condescension, thereby contrasting his own success to the miseries of those left behind in the old country" (42). But in his letter to Lady Gregory, Joyce confesses that "although I have been driven out of my country here as a misbeliever I have found no man yet with a faith like mine" (Ellmann 111). Joyce was Ireland's most fierce critic and most loyal follower. The Irish don't easily forget rejection and condescension.



Joyce's statue in Dublin is, after all, universally called "a prick with a stick." But Joyce wrote about his homeland with a great deal of warmth, not just criticism.



In his fiction, he goes back to Dublin streets again and again, and he goes back to the West of Ireland, where his beloved Nora came from, most memorably in the ending of his story “The Dead.” The last paragraph of that story is the most touching and beautiful description of a native land by a self-exiled writer:

“Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”

James Joyce—a voluntary exile, a wanderer, a seeker—always came home. He famously borrowed the quest motif from the ancient myth of Odysseus, and his homage to Homer’s *Odyssey* in his own monumental novel *Ulysses* is yet another way in which the writer comes home. This master of experimental writing and irreverent violator of tradition returns home whenever he alludes to Odysseus’s wandering and whenever he lets us encounter his Irish equivalent of Odysseus, Leopold Bloom—an Irishman, a Jew, and a cuckold, a “homeless” and alienated character, an “ancient mariner” (Joyce, 1993, p. 179). Tradition gives Joyce a platform upon which he builds a story of a modern-day wanderer, one who suffers abuse from the likes of the aggressive and jingoistic citizen and his companions. But Joyce departs from tradition in ways that infuriated his contemporaries, provoking some countries, including this one, to ban *Ulysses* on the grounds of obscenity. Even Virginia Woolf, an experimental writer herself, said that reading *Ulysses*: “amused, stimulated, charmed” her at first, but then she was “puzzled, bored, irritated, & disillusioned as by a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples” (*D 2*: 188). Indeed, as we plough through the book, we read about Stephen Dedalus’s snot, Leopold Bloom’s erections and bowel movements, and Molly Bloom’s menstruation, and we’re not quite sure where we’re heading, especially when we realize that each chapter assumes a different narrative style. And yet, in all this apparent directionlessness, we learn a great deal about suffering,

betrayal, desire, and compassion. We know the characters intimately, and we want to reach out and touch them, talk to them, cry with them, walk with them.

In *The Odyssey*, when Penelope's suitors see Odysseus in disguise and abuse him, they call him *plankte*, "someone wandering," implying that he does not belong to the place, but also that he is "wandering in mind", "distraught" (Senn, 156). Joyce explores Leopold Bloom's "wandering mind" and his position as a stranger in Dublin. Bloom is ostracized by Dubliners because of his Jewish origin, gentle nature, and inability to participate in the low-key, irreverent pub banter with its puns, shallow witticisms, and profanities. He is estranged from his wife and distant from other Jews, since he does not observe their traditions. But he keeps traveling through the city despite impediments, mostly on foot, and he responds to the violence of narrow-minded, binge-drinking Dubliners by proposing that the answer to "[force], hatred, history, all that" is "Love" (*Ulysses* 273).

Exile and nomadism, those unsettling symptoms of Modernist physical and spiritual displacement, *can* furnish us with love—love for discovery, love for learning, love for the other. It is through leaving the comfort of home and encountering alien worlds, people, and ideas that the humanities classroom thrives. We expect our students to enter the world of the unknown with courage, but we are hesitant to do it ourselves. We should have the courage to face the new collectively as a discipline, despite the potential dangers.

Another Modernist writer, E.M. Foster, gives us an example of a perilous stroll into the unknown.



In *The Machine Stops*, Forster's early-20th-century dystopian tale about the human race living underground, in an elaborate computer-regulated machine allowing people contact with each other via a Skype-like communication system, the main character, Kuno, decides to break out and travel to the surface of the earth. He is aware of the danger: if indeed "one dies immediately in the outer air" (13), as the accepted wisdom has it, his life will be in danger; if he gets out and lives, he faces punishment from the Central Committee running the machine. In the machine, people rarely travel, and they are seized by the "horror of direct experience" (21). The committee's punishment for insubordination is Homelessness, which is believed to be "death. The victim is exposed to the air, which kills him" (31).

When Kuno tells his mother, who worships the machine, that he has been going outside without permits and respirators, her response is simple: “You are throwing civilization away” (36), she says. She decides her son is “reverting to some savage type” (39). Crawling out on the surface of the earth to seek direct experience was, after all, deemed “foolish,” “vulgar and perhaps faintly improper: it was unproductive of ideas, and had no connection with the habits that really mattered” (50). And though this Modernist science-fiction story is an indictment of people’s increasing reliance on technology, it is also a warning against our acceptance of the status quo, our tendency to follow ideologies and traditions unquestioningly, and our fear of the unknown that limits experience and dulls empathy.



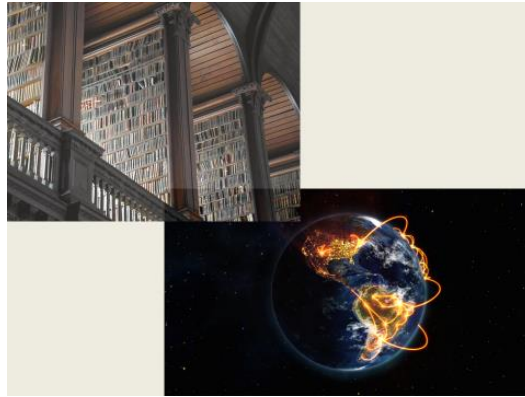
Let’s look at the “crisis of the humanities” as an opportunity to re-envision the field, to send it off on a great adventure away from home. Let’s remember and talk about the origin of the humanities, their roots, but let’s not treat the humanities as a field with a calcified identity, unchanging and entrenched in the past. Lest you misunderstand me: This is not a call to forget about the past, to abandon Confucius and Aristotle, Beowulf and Dante, Voltaire and Tolstoy. Mine is a call to open ourselves up to new ways of teaching them and new ways of assuring our students and decision-makers in academia that the humanities are and always have been relevant. I want the humanities to remember home, but to be comfortable with change, to embrace new opportunities, to feel the excitement of moving forward and to let their identity be molded by that movement, not to be threatened by changing or porous boundaries. If we do not initiate new adventures and if we do not embrace an itinerant mode of exploration as potentially educational and formative, we will be forced to change anyway. And the difference between voluntary exile and being forced into a refugee status is profound. Joyce, for example, was never barred from returning to Dublin. He maintained his ties with Ireland and, if he chose to, he could always return home—through his experimental fiction and political essays or by visiting Ireland himself. Refugees facing real violence have no luxury of returning home. As Adam Zagajewski wrote in one of his poems, refugees forced out of their homes by violence, trudge through snow,

as if leaning towards another, better planet,
with less ambitious generals,
less snow, less wind, fewer cannons,
less History (alas, there's no

such (alas, there's no
such planet, just that hunch).

Shuffling their feet,
they move slowly, very slowly
toward the country of nowhere,
and the city of no one
on the river of never.

(Zagajewski, from “Refugees”)



Underfunded and disrespected humanities are the refugees of academia.

In the last decade alone, whole departments have fallen victim to the corporate takeover of learning. Others are bracing themselves for war right now. So without dismissing the value of staying home, I want to suggest that we explore new ways of thinking about home and that we travel to other disciplines—yes, including computer science and STEM—to enrich our thinking about home. G.K. Chesterton and others before him knew that “The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one’s own country as a foreign land.” Being homesick without being homeless, looking back at one’s roots from a distance, conversing with the past while imagining new beginnings—all this is potentially generative and exciting.

The writers we study in a literature classroom and the teachers who assign their texts put “home” in conversation with the tradition in order to other it. These writers often speak with each other across the boundaries of time and space. They leave home to drop in on distant relatives or total strangers. Colm Tóibín’s *Testament of Mary* responds to the New Testament and allows Mary to voice her dismay over the idol-worship surrounding her son and, eventually, her anguish over his death. A.C. Clarke revisits the narrative of the devil among us in his science-fiction novel *Childhood’s End*. A number of Irish and Irish-American writers talk with or back to James Joyce’s *Dubliners*. Joyce himself converses with Homer, with Irish nationalists, and with Vico. American novelist Michael Cunningham enters a dialogue with Virginia Woolf. Carol Ann Duffy revisits Greek and Roman

mythologies to give voice to the women rendered mute by the original storytellers. This is the essence of the humanities: embracing the nomadic state of not knowing and not belonging and, at the same time, living in the text and conversing with it freely; being rooted in tradition and challenging it; respecting the canon and revising it as we begin to understand who created it in the first place and who was silenced; retaining our reverence for the printed book and letting ourselves feel excited about new modes of writing, publishing, and discussing literature. The humanities would be greatly impoverished without the so-called dead white men, but they would be equally impoverished without scholars, philosophers, and writers who challenge them. Our disciplines are grounded in printed text or painted canvas, but they should also explore the new technologies that democratize people's access to knowledge and allow the difficult conversation with tradition to happen instead of hiding behind a pay wall. We should use these technologies with excitement and criticize them where they fail to deliver.

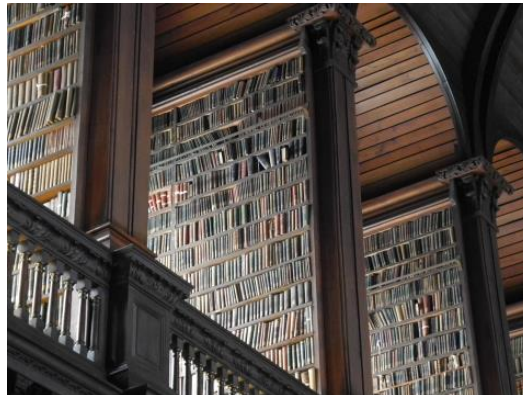
In the nomadic future of the humanities, scholars of sub-Saharan literature collaborate freely with visual artists and computer science experts on projects that would attract students *and* the general public. In the nomadic future of the humanities, business owners, nurses, and local artists join college students in poetry slams and book clubs. Our brilliant philosophers of gender, race, and class leave the campus regularly to engage middle-schoolers and high-schoolers in the life of the mind, leading discussions about the issues that affect them. In the nomadic future of the humanities, we prove that literature is not only for the elite few, that the beauty of the written and spoken word can move everyone, and everyone can try to articulate why.

To accomplish all this, the humanities will have to open up and venture out without the fear that we're undermining some primeval principle of what it is we should be doing as scholars and teachers. Pretentious, intentionally obscure, and insular humanities *will* soon face decline. I do not dismiss the beauty and importance of navigating the world of ideas without any stated utilitarian purpose. But the humanities *should* be in flux, inviting others to join in their nomadism, open to other disciplines, learning from them and teaching them, too.

One avenue we shouldn't be afraid to explore is the sub-field of Digital Humanities. Scholars have been digitizing ancient and otherwise inaccessible texts for over two decades now; they have been developing software and applications that allow for in-depth exploration of difficult writing; they have been turning notoriously difficult books such as Joyce's *Ulysses* into video games to draw a wider audience to the narrative; they have been publishing hyperlinked online editions of novels and poems, offering easy access to expert annotations, available with a click of the mouse.



And yet almost every week I come across an essay or a blog bemoaning the loss of depth in digital reading, the supposed betrayal of the field, the magic of the printed text sold out for the cheap thrill of clicking on a button and instant satisfaction. While I'm not positing that Digital Humanities is the only way to venture out and discover the new, I want to validate the work of those literature, classics, and philosophy scholars who learn to code and labor on new projects in the digital realm.



Mine is not a call to abolish libraries and immerse ourselves in the virtual world. As some of you know, I have been defending the fundamental connection between seemingly aimless browsing or spine reading and intellectual discovery. Both technologies—printed books and computers—are complementary and important to our field.

In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Naomi Baron bemoans the ways in which the digital world has encroached on the humanities. This world, according to her, is “reducing students’ pursuit of work in the humanities” (Baron). She writes that “academics are buying into the transition with little thought for educational consequences.” As an owner of an e-book reader and more “real” books than my house can accommodate, as a teacher who cherishes face-to-face seminar-style discussions and who experiments with using social media and technology in the classroom, I want to say that these different modes need not be in a constant battle. The phrase “digital humanities” is not an oxymoron. Our classrooms can be spaces where the students engage in in-depth reading of a printed text and learn how to approach an electronic text with the same care and scrutiny

as the book. The nomad in me says: Explore all kinds of charted and uncharted written worlds, discover their dangers and potentials, learn how to approach hyperlinked “Paradise Lost” on the screen with the same depth you’d give it if there were a printed book on your lap. Who knows? Maybe we will see a generation of students who would otherwise toss aside a difficult book (I’m looking at you, *Finnegans Wake*), but who—with the help of hyperlinked information, glossaries available with one click of a mouse or tap of a finger, maps, dates, and online conversations, could become life-long readers and learners. True, studies show that students reading on the screen retain less than those reading print, partly because writing notes by hand aides retention of material much more than typing notes on a computer. But we are teaching “digital natives.” Will they abandon their iPads and laptops? I doubt it. Let’s teach them, then, how to use the tools they have at hand effectively. Let’s discuss openly what’s lost when they pick up a Kindle edition of Walt Whitman’s poems. Let’s experiment with both mediums. Let’s give our students the kind of skills they will need to navigate all kinds of texts, most of them digital, once they graduate from college.

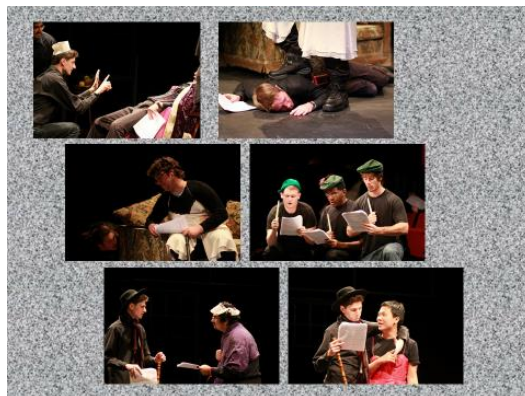
Over a decade ago, Tom Campbell spoke to you here as a Medievalist interested in the latest technological advances. In his LaFollette Lecture “The Virtual Manuscript” he said that by merging the two technologies—the codex and the computer—he could make you see that medieval manuscript he studied in Europe. Many of you remember how excited he was to try out new technologies in the classroom and in his research. Tom proved time and again that a humanities professor’s commitment to technology and sometimes risky explorations of the new can go hand-in-hand with the kind of careful analysis of literary tradition that Wabash has cherished for almost two centuries.

The humanities can democratize access to the most obscure, coveted, unique, and special texts that only the most privileged used to have access to. The comments we hear nowadays from politicians and other public figures that the humanities are a luxury few can afford do a lot of damage, not just to the field, but to our students as well. People who say this tend to work under several assumptions: that careful reading and a deep engagement with the world of ideas are extraneous to education; that there is nothing practical or relevant in letting our minds wander; and that students should not be nomads, that roaming through the messy and obscure world of ideas does not and will not lead to their definition of success. I want to challenge this notion today. It is harmful and presumptuous to tell 18-year-old students first what success is or should be for them, and second, how exactly to achieve it. If we do so, we define their identities for them, build walls around this definition lest the distraction of the humanities creeps in, and deny them the kind of growth and maturation that comes from doubting, questioning, struggling, fumbling for words, and—yes—feeling uncomfortable. We give the students one answer and bar them from all the other possibilities of their becoming. As Kristen Case put it, “To say that women's studies, or philosophy, or French is a waste of time for students who need more-practical training is to tell those students we already know who and what they are. It is to kill their other chances.” Like James Joyce and other Modernists who left home in both literal and metaphorical ways when they abandoned the comfort of established modalities

of expression, the humanities—as well as their teachers and students—should be encouraged to leave home and redefine themselves as they cross borders and encounter an alien world.

If the humanities could repeat Stephen Dedalus’s call “Away! Away!,” with equal enthusiasm but with less arrogance, perhaps we wouldn’t be talking about their “crisis.” If we acknowledge the importance of the formative origins of the field and continue exploring them unapologetically and with passion but in a way that would be inclusive of those unfamiliar with the prohibitive jargon of most academic papers, we could capture the interest in ancient philosophy, Medieval morality plays, or postmodern theater among people who are not affiliated with academia but who enjoy the life of the mind. We could avoid the charge of being locked up in the Ivory Tower, waiting for our slow death as the masses outside rage against us. If we admit that revamping and energizing the field will take resources and a tremendous amount of creativity and courage, and if we reward the courage to leave “home” in search of discovery, the humanities classrooms will always be filled with students.

Let me be clear: I am not advocating for *replacing* real books and real, face-to-face, challenging, often messy discussions of literature or philosophy with 21st-century technology. Nor am I advocating for crafting the humanities classrooms as purely utilitarian spaces devoid of a sense of wonder. The true value of liberal arts education lies in the intimacy of the classroom, not with corporate-driven electronic learning platforms. The true value of the humanities lies in searching and wondering. When my students in the James Joyce’s *Ulysses* course complained about the difficulty of the 15th chapter of the novel, written in the form of a play and filled with the characters’ hallucinations, we took that class outside the English Department and walked across Grant St. to the experimental theater in the Fine Arts building. Instead of sending my students to proliferating web links that elucidate Joyce’s *Ulysses* to first-time readers, I opted for a different and more time-consuming experience. Finally, the students had a reason to read that long “Circe” chapter closely and analyze the language—I asked them to stage it for others.



So they got their parts, studied their characters in great detail, selected makeshift costumes and props, rehearsed, and invited the Wabash and DePauw communities to their performance. The result was stunning. We moved from whining about incomprehensible

Joyce, through complaints about the assigned parts (“Doctor Brewer, you gave me the role of a prostitute!”) and we arrived on stage, putting to use the long hours of struggling with the text and its meaning.

The humanities open to other disciplines and to the world outside the classroom are alive, and they would be hard to dismiss as irrelevant.



What I am *not* advocating is what some call “the shortsighted techno-boosterism” that, they claim, “is rendering American culture increasingly superficial and frivolous” (Masciotra). Before connecting the two technologies—the printed book and the world wide web—and before taking the humanities for a stroll outside the campus gates, it is essential to delve deep into the text we want to transform or elucidate. Digital Humanities focused only on the end rather than the origin and the means would indeed be the death of our discipline. But in a classroom filled with digital natives, exploring the intricacies, nuances, and ethical dimensions of the written word with a goal to produce an interactive platform to share with others might just give those students an incentive to take the time to understand literature.

We’re already doing a lot of great work here, at Wabash. Adriel Trott is blogging about philosophy; Elizabeth Morton made a movie about a Nigerian sculptor, Lamidi Fakeye; Jill Lambertson is teaching a popular audio rhetoric class; the English department offers courses that take students abroad and allows them real immersion in the literary and cultural worlds they study; the Rhetoric department started the civic engagement project that transforms theory of public engagement into practice in our own community. We send students to professional conferences, writers’ workshops, and exhibitions. But it would take a more systemic shift to make all this possible on a larger scale. First, a lot of these creative ways of approaching the humanities are time-consuming and costly, and grants for the humanities scholars and teachers, always unimpressive, are becoming even more rare as the National Endowment for the Humanities and Fulbright funds are being drastically cut. Second, we should start rewarding public engagement with the humanities in tangible ways. A series of compelling and clear blogs about an obscure 17th-century poet should count toward tenure and promotion, *together with* required well-researched papers published in specialized, peer-reviewed journals. Both forms of engagement with our

subjects are important and valid, and they should be complementary as well as rewarded. Publishing in traditional academic journals tests new ideas on the forum of narrowly specialized scholars and adds new knowledge to the field. Explaining our research to the *general public* in clear, accessible prose could make it possible for us to *continue* testing new ideas in a narrowly specialized forum. If popularizing the humanities, the hard work of bringing them out in the open, is derided as a job of a traveling salesman, the humanities will lose public support, and along with it, the resources necessary to thrive.

Why Save the Humanities?

And finally, why—some of you may ask—are the humanities worth saving? In the recent “death of the humanities” debate, one argument is quite prevalent: that the humanities are out of touch with contemporary reality, with the demands of the job market, with the changing culture. I want to claim that the humanities have never been more in tune with reality. What’s more relevant to contemporary issues than a narrative, like Virginia Woolf’s, of a man suffering from what we now call PTSD and taking his own life? What’s more relevant than E.M. Forster’s century-old story of a mother who lost touch with friends and family because she relied entirely on what the screen in front of her told her to do and think; than a fable about animals corrupted by power after their successful revolution; than a play about one Caliban who, having been enslaved for a long time, says to his masters “You taught me language, and my profit on’t/ Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!” (I.ii.366–368)? As we face the dire consequences of the divide-and-rule colonial oppression in Africa and the Middle East, how can reading and discussing Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* be pointless? As we watch the police shoot unarmed black men in the streets, can we learn something by analyzing the dehumanizing language Conrad’s Marlow uses to describe the black people he encounters in the Congo? In Emerson’s words, “The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it.” Talking about issues of political violence, injustice, betrayal, friendship, gender, poverty, racism, miscommunication between generations, war and peace, or our fragile ecosystem—all these complex topics embedded in literature of all ages—can indeed equip our students with the tools necessary not only to thrive on the job market but also to be compassionate and informed leaders.

Kristen Case talks about “moments of classroom grace” in the humanities. “There is,” she says, “difficulty, discomfort, even fear in such moments, which involve confrontations with what we thought we knew (...). These moments do not reflect a linear progress from ignorance to knowledge; instead they describe a step away from a complacent knowing into a new world in which, at least at first, everything is cloudy, nothing is quite clear.” We do not aim to confuse in an English classroom. We do aim to complicate. We aim to reveal complex emotions in the sound of the snow falling softly on nocturnal Dublin. We aim to disturb easy assumptions and jingoistic narratives as we read about the atrocities of war. We aim to question why a middle-aged ad canvasser would acquiesce to his opera-singer wife’s infidelity. We aim to explore the complexities of human emotions and decisions

beyond numbers and statistics. We aim to empathize. We aim to discover the beauty of language.



In our search for discovery, in our wandering, maps often come in handy. But Eavan Boland, an Irish poet, has already told us that “the science of cartography is limited” because

the line which says woodland and cries hunger
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress,
and finds no horizon

will not be there. (25-28)

Maps, so indispensable in our journeys, simplify reality, impose an established symbolic order, and reduce historical and cultural significance to abstract spatial markers. The humanities provide a different kind of map-writing. It’s an exploration of hunger, betrayal, and joy that is not systematic but deeply human, that hopefully releases our ability to see human beings, with all their imperfections and pain, behind numbers and charts.

We need the humanities to survive because experiencing the alien—alien people, alien places, alien points of view, alien emotions—is the only way we can approximate understanding of suffering and loss, of anger and joy. If we want to teach our students how to live humanely, act responsibly, lead effectively, and think critically, discipline-specific knowledge will not be enough. Looking at human tragedy solely from the point of view of numbers and systematized data is limited. I want my students to search in those classroom discussions for a wellspring of empathy so, one day, when they hear about migrant children who faced unspeakable violence in their home countries, they know that beyond numbers and bottom-line cost analyses are suffering human beings. When they listen to two warring sides explain organized killing, they question what they hear and feel the pain of the parents whose children were bombed in their sleep. It is in the humanities classroom that young Wabash men can approach and try to understand the mind of a conscientious objector instead of condemning him on the spot as a coward; to empathize with a gay man

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