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**The Ends of English:
Divergent Perceptions of Literary Study at the Edge of the Present**

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Abstract

When *The New Yorker* published Nathan Heller's article "The End of the English Major" in early 2023, the response from the intellectual community was robust. Most responses were critical, but few commentators acknowledged Heller's main contribution to the conversation about the "end" or "death" of the humanities: original interviews. This essay attempts to remedy that oversight by close reading the interviews to see what can be gleaned from them beyond their place in Heller's narrative. Ultimately, I argue that the interviews reveal a temporal divergence between students and professors that determines how each group understands the purpose of English departments, the humanities, and the university. The central question this essay raises is whether the divergence can be navigated to prevent the end of English as a university department and disciplinary formation.

I am increasingly unsure that our task is to “save” the humanities, a discourse that keeps us entrenched in the past rather than looking to the future.

—Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, “The Humanities Are Worth Fighting For”

When *The New Yorker* published Nathan Heller’s article “The End of the English Major” online on February 27, 2023 and in print on March 6, 2023,¹ the response from the intellectual community was robust. Beyond the usual letter-to-the-editor responses,² it produced responses of varying lengths in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *University World News*, and on a variety of university websites.³ In addition to what might be considered more official channels of response, professors and students published commentary on Twitter, Medium, Substack, and other personal blogs. Responses even extended beyond the medium of writing when, for example, Stony Brook University held a live forum on the article that was streamed on YouTube.⁴ Overall, the responses were critical, laudatory, or additive in detail, meaning Heller’s article was generative in a way not all articles are—even typical articles in *The New Yorker*. Clearly, Heller hit on something, or he at least told a good story. Using Arizona State University (ASU) and Harvard University as case studies, Heller tracks the material and philosophical changes taking place on university campuses and their effects on English and other humanities

¹ Nathan Heller, “The End of the English Major,” *New Yorker*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/the-end-of-the-english-major>. The online and print versions are identical in content.

² “Why Study English?” *The Mail, New Yorker*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/27/letters-from-the-march-27-2023-issue>.

³ For reasons of space, I have not included footnote citations for these or subsequent responses unless explicitly mentioned. However, I have included examples of the responses mentioned in this paragraph in the bibliography. See, in the order mentioned, Douthat, Pearce, Blackwood, Newman, Gutkin, Greenfield, Emmerson, Hanlon (2023), Hobeika, Maiello, and Sopher.

⁴ The forum is still available on YouTube. See Ken Lindblom et al., “Reflecting on ‘The End of the English Major,’” Stony Brook University Libraries, streamed live on April 19, 2023, YouTube video, 1:18:00, <https://youtu.be/ISVwhkzQFoo>.

disciplines. The changes taking place reflect universities' turn to corporatize their operations and overall mission by prioritizing profit, which ultimately leads some majors, departments, and disciplines to be favored over others. Unsurprisingly, in a profit model, English is not only deemed irrelevant but also annoyingly in the way. Above all, Heller's piece tracks how the contraction of English is understood by university students, professors, and administrators. But, one might wonder, why would such an article garner so much attention? After all, the discourse of what is often called the "crisis of the humanities" is not new,⁵ and though the variant focused specifically on literary studies is more recent, it too has a history.

Still, a few reasons may explain why Heller's article led to an influx of chatter. The first is timing: writing on the end or death of literary study (as opposed to simply its crisis or decline) has picked up since 2018 to the point of it being in fashion.⁶ For instance, the publication of John Guillory's *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* in December 2022 produced its own cache of commentary on the state of literary studies that was also widely published and often in conversation with that produced by Heller's piece.⁷ Second, the university itself seems to be an increasingly popular topic in the public sphere, where anyone and everyone can debate the purpose of a university degree and the university's place in society. All one needs to do is open an app to find commentary on the recent Supreme Court ruling on Affirmative Action or what Florida Governor Ron DeSantis is doing to the curriculum at state colleges.

⁵ For a long view of the "crisis of the humanities" discourse, see Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

⁶ To be clear, I'm not saying talk of death begins in 2018, only that it increases. A selection of writing from 2018 and 2019, for example, would be compiled in "Endgame: Can Literary Studies Survive?" special issue, *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2020), which is full of the language of end, death, and even extinction. For an earlier and now-representative take on the death of the humanities, see Benjamin Winterhaler. "The Morbid Fascination with the Death of the Humanities," *Atlantic*, June 6, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/06/the-morbid-fascination-with-the-death-of-the-humanities/372216/>. For a literary take on the death of the humanities, see Chapter 5 of J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁷ As with the responses to Heller, a sample of the responses to Guillory are in the bibliography. See Brouillette, Collini, Dames, Emre (2023), Kindly, and Schuessler.

Third, Heller's article is unique because it is a long-form piece of journalism about the death of literary study that relies extensively on interviews. Discussion of the subject typically takes place in publications written for the university community, and when it appears in periodicals, it is often in the style of opinion pieces. Data may be used in both cases, but interviews are minimal. And since Heller's piece was published in *The New Yorker*, which had a total of 18.8 million website visits in March 2023,⁸ it likely reached more people than any other piece on the subject in recent memory. In short, Heller found a moment for his article.

As voluminous as the responses to Heller's article were, however, not all were created equal. Some were Twitter rants, a few maxed out at one paragraph, and others merely rehashed decades-old arguments. Perhaps this is not out of place for the times, since loud, short, and recycled are all mainstays of social media (which would seem only to further highlight Heller's timeliness), but it is also not representative of the responses as a whole. Thoughtful responses were in fact published, and their contributions added meaningful insights to a discussion about an issue that many see as a fait accompli. Of all the responses, though, the one Sarah Blackwood wrote for *The New York Review of Books* is perhaps the most acute. In it, Blackwood argues that it is misguided to respond to Heller's piece or argue English's value with data countering the crisis narrative (even though the data exist) because the debate is not actually meant to arrive at truth. Instead, discussion about the end of English is a discursive construction. As Blackwood puts it, "We are not actually talking about the facts of higher education... Rather, we're talking about *what counts as a fact*—what counts as knowledge. And neither the successes of the English major nor the desperate needs of those who are working in English departments are

⁸ Figure from "newyorker.com," Similarweb, accessed June 22, 2023, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/newyorker.com/#overview>.

rising to the level of fact.”⁹ No one outside of English majors/professors is interested in the facts pertaining to the discipline, especially university administrators; indeed, Blackwood’s main contribution is to suggest that university administrators are especially uninterested in the facts because they are uninterested in keeping English alive. Letting English departments die, Blackwood suggests, would allow them to put their energy into departments that are not only seemingly more profitable but that are also the ones they want to promote as profitable. The university, then, is central in constructing a discourse about English being in crisis and unprofitable because it furthers its own goals of growth, and this is why it is uninterested in facts.

Blackwood argues that the university itself largely determines the value of “English,” but in doing so she misses crucial information contained within the article. Like many commentators that critiqued Heller’s biases and blind spots, she underexplored the main form of data that constitutes the article: the interviews. The result is that she misses the pivotal role that student and professor perceptions play in the discourse around the “death of English.” Even if the interviews represent a narrow portion of the population who study English in the university, they offer deeper insights than the typical commentary in that they represent not argumentative position papers or think-pieces but firsthand accounts of what it’s like to exist within the various institutions that are professed to be “dying.” Above all, however, the interviews reveal a stark divide between how students and professors understand and speak about the various ends of English. This intra-institutional division is not simply a product of the university, as Blackwood emphasizes, but also of perceived pressures from society, the economy, and peers. By attending to these perceptions in Heller’s article and the differences that they reveal between students’ and professors’ understanding of the value of English, we can better understand how it is not simply

⁹ Sarah Blackwood, “Letter from an English Department on the Brink,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 2, 2023, <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2023/04/02/letter-from-an-english-department-on-the-brink/>.

the university that produces material changes in English—such as divestment and lower enrollment—but also the social circumstances, the temporal logics, and affective contours of the discourse that churn this debate. Calling attention to the rhetoric of these interviews may not ultimately prevent the death of English nor diagnose its core malady, but it may pull us away from dead-end solutions, if solutions are what we are after.

In order to provide heightened attention to the rhetoric of the “death of English,” I close-read many of the interviews in Heller’s article and, in some cases, Heller’s commentary. Although Heller jumps between students and professors, I will attempt to slow down this movement and analyze the students and professors separately to highlight their differences. In the first section, I call attention to student voices that fled the English major, reluctantly stayed, or wholeheartedly carried its banner into the trenches. In doing so, I explore the ways in which students speak about both the material reality of college but also their social and emotional circumstances in a future-oriented rhetoric. In the second section, I call attention to the rhetoric of the professors, which, as I’ll show, traffics in the language of the past. Intriguingly, the professors also fall into a tripartite that mirrors the students: hopelessness about English’s situation, grappling with its problems, and fighting for its survival by any means necessary. One thing that will become clear from the interviews specifically and Heller’s report overall is the terminological fluidity between English, literary study, and the humanities. That these terms are used interchangeably is not an error in Heller’s reporting. Although there may be differences between the terms, they are often used interchangeably because they are placed in opposition to STEM and the social sciences, not with each other. Furthermore, the lack of precision is at least in part a result of the discourse around the humanities: the separation between reality and perception facilitates what Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado calls “the inertial conflation of ‘the

humanities' with 'English departments.'"¹⁰ It is my hope that looking at the interviews in Heller's article will highlight and complicate this synecdochic movement while also acknowledging its rhetorical power.

The Students: Abandonment

In a time of ever-increasing tuition and student debt,¹¹ it is not surprising that most of the students Heller interviews see English as an impractical major because they don't think it will translate into a job. This holds even for students who enjoy literary study but are ambivalent or unconvinced about its practicality. Take ASU senior Luiza Monti, one of the first students quoted in the article, who had once "fantasized about Italian language and literature" but ultimately decided to major in Business (Language and Culture) as "a safeguard thing."¹² She tells Heller that "there's an emphasis on who is going to hire you," yet the direction from which this emphasis comes is unclear. Monti might be saying the Business major puts "an emphasis on who is going to hire you," or she might be saying that the emphasis to get hired comes from family or society. Whichever version Monti means, though, one thing is clear: literary study is not associated with an emphasis on getting hired. At least that is the perception, for it seems as if Monti chose Business over literary study because either she or some outside influence believed it would lead to a better job and, therefore, a more stable future.

Like Monti, the assumption that studying literature won't lead to a good job is what led ASU senior Justin Kovach to major in something outside of the humanities. Also like Monti, Kovach enjoys literature. In fact, he more than enjoys it: he is an enthusiast who claims to "like

¹⁰ Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, "The Humanities Are Worth Fighting For," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 14, 2023, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-humanities-are-worth-fighting-for/>.

¹¹ See the graphs in Arman Madani, "We Weren't Ready for a 710% Rise in Tuition Costs," *Statecraft*, July 9, 2023, <https://statecraft.beehiiv.com/p/student-loan-debt-forgiveness>.

¹² All quotes from Heller's article are from the online version, so there are no associated page numbers.

the long, hard classics with the fancy language.” But his enthusiasm wasn’t enough to convince him to pursue literature as a major in the face of an unknown employment future. Even if the several STEM subjects he tried hadn’t “brought him any sense of fulfilment,” he assures Heller that “he never doubted that a field in STEM... was the best path for him.” For a student who “loved to write and always had” to believe that “a field in STEM... was the best for him” even though those subjects didn’t bring him “any sense of fulfilment,” it is clear that there was some outside pressure influencing his decision. For Monti, it may have been social, but for Kovach, it seems to be financial. As Heller writes,

Kovach will graduate with some thirty thousand dollars in debt, a burden that influenced his choice of a degree. For decades now, the cost of education has increased over all ahead of inflation. One theory has been that this pressure, plus the growing precariousness of the middle class, has played a role in driving students like him toward hard-skill majors.

Kovach believes STEM “was the best path for him” because he will graduate in debt. But the twist here is that it is not only the cost of living that has pushed “students like him toward hard-skill majors” but also “the cost of education.” In other words, it is the cost of earning his degree that pushed Kovach toward a STEM major. For Kovach (and likely many other students), a degree in STEM is the best way to get a job that pays enough to repay his school debt—the “burden that influenced his choice of degree.” Even if, as Heller informs his readers, “English majors, on average, carry less debt than students in other fields,” it is the perception of English’s remunerative feebleness that drives students into the arms of STEM. True, English majors “may take longer to pay [their debt] down,” but it would be interesting to learn how many people pay attention to the truth of this part of Heller’s tidbit and not the part saying that “English majors, on average, carry less debt than students in other fields.” To be sure, the truth of either phrase is irrelevant for our purposes because the point is that it is perception, not truth, driving the exodus

from English. In line with commentators like Emma Duncan, who claims that “literature is lovely stuff but it’s not a way to earn your bread,”¹³ Kovach simply believes a degree in literature cannot land him a job that will pay enough to cover his school debt.

An unnamed but recent graduate who studied molecular biology at Harvard (who I’ll call Student X) has a similar yet different story than Kovach: although her story is different from Kovach’s in significant ways, it leads to the same conclusion. As Heller introduces her, “Like Justin Kovach, she described herself as an avid student of literature who never considered studying it in depth.” The difference is that, unlike Kovach (at least to our knowledge), Student X is the daughter of immigrants and a first-generation college student. It may be reductive to think that a college education means the same thing to every immigrant family, but it cannot be denied that one main reason migrants come to the United States is to give their children a chance at a better life. And this seems to be the case for Student X, who tells Heller, “My parents, who were low-income and immigrants, instilled in me the very great importance of finding a concentration that would get me a job—‘You don’t go to Harvard for basket weaving’ was one of the things they would say.”¹⁴ The juxtaposition of “a concentration that would get me a job” with concentrations seen to be equivalent to “basket weaving” makes it clear what Student X’s parents were saying to her: major in STEM, not something like English. Taking their advice seriously, Student X’s parents are not telling Student X to major in something that will get her *any* job but something that will get her a high-paying, prestigious job. Whatever their

¹³ Duncan is writing for a UK audience and with UK figures, but her argument that majoring in STEM would solve youth discontent would sound familiar to an American audience. Her argument seems provocative, but it merely repeats a style of argument that believes any combination of numbers is evidence of something. See Emma Duncan, “We Should Cheer Decline of Humanities Degrees,” *Times*, June 16, 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-should-cheer-decline-of-humanities-degrees-5pp6ksgmz>.

¹⁴ At Harvard, majors are referred to as concentrations.

understanding of the work that “basket weaving” majors do, Student X’s parents believe that only STEM can give Student X the future they want for her.

Dutifully, Student X followed her parents’ advice and chose to concentrate in molecular and cellular biology. As she tells Heller of her first semester at Harvard,

When I came, I took a course that was, like, the hardest course you could take your freshman year. It integrated computer science, physics, math, chemistry, and biology. That course fulfilled a lot of the requirements to be able to do molecular and cellular biology, so I finished that, for my parents. I can get a job. I’m *educated*.¹⁵

Notice that “the hardest course you could take your freshman year,” according to Student X, is a smorgasbord of the hard sciences. We don’t know if this description is Student X’s own, something rumored among Harvard students themselves, or even something told to students by their academic advisors, but the interjection “like” just before it and the subjunctive “could” within it suggest that it is more a belief stemming from the breadth of prerequisite knowledge it requires. After all, she does not say it was the hardest course she took, only that it “was, like, the hardest course you could take.” Whether Student X chose to concentrate in molecular and cellular biology before or after this course is unclear, but what is clear is that the decision to do so was for her parents. Heller doesn’t tell us whether Student X was in fact able to get a job in her field (probably because we’re meant to assume, or already implicitly believe, that a Harvard STEM graduate can get a job in any scenario)¹⁶, but whether Student X feels “educated” is no less ambiguous. Her emphasis of the word can signify many things including sarcasm or derision, but in the construction here—at the end of a list—it can easily be read as simply checking off a box. With her STEM degree from Harvard, she is considered educated by her parents, employers, and society, but does she feel educated? Perhaps, or perhaps being educated

¹⁵ Emphasis in original.

¹⁶ Heller hits on this idea earlier in the article when he says, “Basic employability is assured by the [Harvard] diploma: even a Harvard graduate who majors in somersaults will be able to find some kind of job to pay the bills.”

for Student X is inseparable from getting a job. Whether it is her belief or her parents' being acted out, Student X is making the link between being educated and getting a specific type of job—between education and its future use-value—that essentially pushes out non-STEM concentrations from the status of being educated because they are perceived as disconnected from employment.

Student X makes the disconnect between non-STEM concentrations and jobs explicit to Heller, though she adds enough detail to show that the “basket weaving” concentrations that act as STEM’s foil for her and her parents are the humanities specifically (not the humanities plus the social sciences). Thus, when telling Heller about her foray into the humanities, she confesses,

I took courses in Chinese film and literature. I took classes in the science of cooking. My issue as a first-gen student is I always view humanities as a passion project. You have to be affluent in order to be able to take that on and state, “Oh, I can pursue this, because I have the money to do whatever I want”.... I view the humanities as very hobby based.

At first glance, Student X is saying that she separates the humanities from viable jobs because she must “as a first-gen student.” She doesn’t have the luxury to take the humanities as anything but “a passion project” because she must use her education to get her a job that will, following her parents’ desire, change her social status. On a second look, however, she is saying something more. It is not only because she is a first-generation student that she believes the humanities are an unrealistic option for her but also because her family is not affluent. The belief that only affluent students can study the humanities is a common one, but again, whatever the truth of the claim, it’s the perception of the link between wealth and humanistic study that is forming opinions and driving decisions. Even though Student X asserts that “you have to be affluent in order to be able to” study the humanities, this assertion seems to be guided more by the belief that affluent students can tell themselves, “Oh, I can pursue this, because I have the money to do whatever I want,” than it is in data. This is why she says, “I view the humanities as very hobby

based”: it is her “view” that the humanities are associated with hobbies instead of work because it is her belief that the humanities are associated with affluence—that is, with a status group that doesn’t need to work. No truth is being grappled with here because Student X and her parents don’t need to grapple with the humanities and its relation to any real job market; as far as we know, Student X achieved her parents’ dream of improving her social status. Because she was successful with STEM, her experience becomes its own form of evidence for the truth of her or her parents’ beliefs about the humanities. STEM is the ticket to a different future, they can say, not “basket weaving.”

The Students: Reluctance

Even if Student X represents the perspective of a student who ultimately chooses to major in something seen as more practical than English, students who do choose to major or minor in English are ambivalent about their decisions or struggle through them. For example, ASU junior Meg Macias explains to Heller the psychological challenges she feels as an English major: “It’s hard for students like me, who are pursuing an English major, to find joy in what they’re doing... They always know there’s someone who wishes that they were doing something else.” In other words, Macias struggles to enjoy being an English major because she feels the pressure of other people's expectations. The “someone who wishes that [English majors] were doing something else” could be anyone including a friend, parent, or even a career advisor struggling to help English majors find meaningful and well-paying work. Here, Macias’s belief that others are critical of her choice of major creates a real dissatisfaction with it. And when she refers to herself as part of a larger group by saying, “It’s hard for students like me... to find joy in what they’re doing,” she seems to suggest that this is a general feeling among English majors at ASU. Even if

anecdotal, it's easy to see how this pressure from outside of English can start to weaken morale and possibly even the quality of work that English majors produce.

The impact of external perceptions on personal decisions is something that Harvard junior Isabel Mehta has also had to navigate. Before ultimately settling on English, she dismissed the possibility of concentrating in it because of its perceived lack of rigor, telling Heller, "I would never say this to any of my English- or my film-major friends, but I kind of thought that those majors were a *joke*."¹⁷ Like Student X's parents, Mehta associated the humanities with frivolity. Even though she consider herself a writer, Mehta did not see English as a serious pursuit. It was so absurd an idea, in fact, that Mehta recalls thinking, "I'm a writer, but I'll never be an English major." It's incredible to think that a writer would claim that she would "*never* be an English major,"¹⁸ but if that writer sees English as a joke, what is the alternative? If as a writer Mehta believes that English is a ridiculous concentration on which to spend her time and money, then we shouldn't be surprised that she had anticipated looking elsewhere. Once again, however, it is Mehta's perception of English as frivolous, expressed through her admission that "I *kind of thought* that those majors were a joke,"¹⁹ that originally drove her away from English. She tried an interdisciplinary concentration that blended the humanistic work of philosophy with the social scientific work of politics and economics, but it turned out to be another name for "classmates railing on capitalism all day." She settled on English presumably after some trial and error, perhaps realizing that she was most intellectually stimulated in English courses; in other words, it was coursework itself that changed her perception of English. Still, even after, in Heller's words, "she landed uneasily in English after all," Mehta has to battle external

¹⁷ Emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Emphasis mine.

perceptions of English that continue to influence her self-perception. As she tells Heller, “I have a warped sense of identity, where I’m studying something really far removed from what a lot of people here view as central, but I’m not removed from these cultural forces.” Key here is how Mehta’s “warped sense of identity” comes from the distance between studying English and “what a lot of people here view as central.” Her experience in English and as someone “not removed from these cultural forces”—cultural forces she is studying as an English major—has shown her the value of studying English. But that is not enough to compete with the perception of her peers or university administrators who see English as a peripheral subject of study because it either doesn’t seem practical (peers) or doesn’t earn the university money (administrators). We don’t even need to know what the people Mehta is referring to view as central (though, of course, we know it’s STEM), because whatever it is, English is not part of it. The sad part is that Mehta feels the effects of this belief so much that it has warped her identity to the point where she must always question her decision to concentrate in English.

Beyond individual psychology, one way the peripheral status of the humanities at Harvard becomes apparent is in the built environment. Although this may seem peripheral itself, Heller shows how the built environment speaks volumes about the university’s priorities. Yet, even without Heller’s analysis, the impact of Harvard’s built environment on perceptions of value comes through in a couple of student comments. For instance, a sophomore studying mechanical engineering tells Heller,

Harvard is spending a huge amount of money on the engineering school. Mark Zuckerberg just gave another half billion dollars for an A.I. and natural-intelligence research institute, and they added new professorships. The money at Harvard—and a lot of other universities, too—is disproportionately going into STEM.

Whether through reading or rumor, the sophomore STEM major is aware of the imbalance between the humanities and STEM disciplines. And the imbalance is clear. Even if this is all

rumor, there are no rumors of money being spent on the humanities. “A huge amount of money” is going to “the engineering school” (a building that, Heller claims earlier in the article, “reportedly cost a billion dollars”) and “another half a billion dollars” is going to toward infrastructure to study AI. But, of course, we know it’s not simply rumor, for it is precisely because of changes in the built environment that students see how “the money at Harvard” is paying for “new professorships” (after all, the new buildings need to be filled with a new workforce) and “disproportionately going into STEM.” Through mere observation, then, students can see that Harvard prioritizes STEM over other areas of inquiry. One doesn’t even need to know exact numbers to know what the university prioritizes because the built environment tells all. This is why the student’s addition of “and a lot of other universities, too” in the passage above is not a gross generalization: the built environment at universities reflects more and more their investment in STEM and their divestment in the humanities. Even enthusiastic humanities students might question their choice of major in the face of billion-dollar buildings for STEM.

The Students: Into the Trenches

Perhaps no student interviewed by Heller is more aware of the connection between Harvard’s investment in the built environment and its administrative priorities than Saul Glist, a Harvard student concentrating in History-&-Literature. With stunning clarity, Glist says of Harvard’s built environment, “I think it’s really a question of what you’re investing in. When you’re telling touring students, ‘This is our shiny new building that is the jewel of our expanding campus,’ and are making no visible investments in the humanities, that creates a narrative.” For Glist, far from being an accident, the built environment is a statement of value. The distinct contrast between the “shiny new building that is the jewel of our expanding campus” being shown off to prospective/current students and “no visible investments in the humanities” shows

that what Harvard puts on display is what it values. The building may be one billion dollars, but it is also 544,000 square feet, eight floors, and six miles worth of walking all around; in a word, it is massive. In both price tag and scale, the Science and Engineering Complex, as the behemoth is known, is meant to dazzle. Meanwhile, the humanities get no infrastructural investment whatsoever, and for Glist, it is this glaring imbalance that “creates a narrative” of what Harvard values and what it doesn’t. But Glist doesn’t stop there: he provides an end to which the narrative of value is being used. In Heller’s summary of Glist, “He believed that universities were all too happy to accept plummeting enrollments, because the story of decline created its own vortex—one that drew away duties that the university, in its present pursuit of growth and revenue, might prefer not to deal with.” Agreeing with (and preempting) Blackwood,²⁰ Glist believes that universities are not simply allowing the humanities to flounder but are also hoping that they do. Ostensibly, the humanities don’t get state-of-the-art buildings because they don’t earn the university money “in its present pursuit of growth and revenue.” Lower enrollments in the humanities allow the university to justify investing less in the humanities, which further reduces enrollment—the “vortex” that the university hopes will take care of (decimate) the humanities so it doesn’t have to waste money saving them. With the humanities weakened or gone entirely, the “duties that the university... might prefer not to deal with” can be brushed aside by the logic of the invisible hand to continue to build a campus that is hospitable only to those the disciplines that can contribute to its growth.

The narrative of decline works because it uses the logic of the market—a logic that Harvard and an increasing number of universities across the country rely on to articulate goals and make decisions. For Glist (and almost anyone with an investment in the humanities,

²⁰ Sarah Blackwood, “Letter from an English Department on the Brink.”

including scholars like Judith Butler)²¹, the value of the humanities cannot and should not be determined by market value because it assumes that value is self-evident and not something that can be created or established outside of market logic. As Glist frames the issue, “The question we should be asking is not *whether* the humanities have any role in our society or the university in fifty or a hundred years! It’s what do investments in the humanities look like—and what kind of ideal future can we imagine?”²² It may seem as if Glist is saying the value of the humanities is self-evident, but that would be a shallow reading in the context of the rest of his comments.

Instead, he is saying that, by asking “*whether* the humanities have any role in our society or the university,” we are already missing the mark because the question becomes one of utility—that is, of worth. From this perspective, we would be asking why the humanities are worth investing in when instead, says Glist, we should be asking “what ... investments in the humanities look like.” The second question is about creating value, not assuming that value is intrinsic, constant, and self-perpetuating, and it reminds us that society determines what is valuable and how it is deemed as such. When Glist says what we should really be asking is “what kind of ideal future can we imagine?” he is ultimately posing another question: what are we as a society (or a university) going to determine as valuable? If we determine that the humanities are worth investing in, then they will become valuable; if we continue to think that they are self-evidently invaluable, then we will not invest in them. Glist’s intervention, then, is simple: universities can and should alter their notion of value.

It is clear that universities have a huge role in determining perceptions of value, but perceptions of the humanities in general and literary study in particular are also determined by other things such as the expectations and needs of the current generation of college students. For

²¹ Judith Butler, “The Public Futures of the Humanities,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 3 (2022).

²² Emphasis in original.

example, in his conversation with Harvard junior Henry Haimo, Heller writes, “I asked Haimo whether there seemed to be a dominant vernacular at Harvard. (When I was a student there, people talked a lot about things being ‘reified.’) Haimo told me that there was: the language of statistics.” It’s important to note that Haimo is a history major, so his comment about “the language of statistics” should be seen as more than an attempt to promote this language (which is something we may have suspected if he were a data science major, for example). It’s also important to note that Heller is asking Haimo not simply what a popular vernacular is but rather “whether there seemed to be a dominant vernacular” among Harvard students. Therefore, if a humanities major is aware that the language of statistics is the dominant vernacular, it seems reasonable to assume that the language of statistics reaches beyond the statistics classroom and the confines of STEM. Haimo confirms this when he tells Heller, “Even if I’m in the humanities, and giving my impression of something, somebody might point out to me, ‘Well, who was your sample? How are you gathering your data? I mean, statistics is everywhere. It’s part of any good critical analysis of things.” As a matter of intrigue or survival, the language of statistics has infiltrated the humanities and, by reaching into all aspects of intellectual life, has become the dominant vernacular at Harvard (though one could safely make this claim about social life in general.) But it is once again significant that Haimo is a history major because he is speaking of the language of statistics approvingly. “It’s part of any good critical analysis of things,” Haimo affirms, even in the humanities. When he mentions that “somebody might point out to me, ‘Well, who was your sample? How are you gathering your data?’” he is not expressing annoyance or disdain—he is using the example to show statistics’ second nature among students of all academic backgrounds today. After all, if “statistics is everywhere,” why should it be surprising

that “even if [Haimo] is in the humanities, and giving [his] impression of something,” the language of statistics enters the discussion?

The humanities cannot escape statistics’ omnipresence, and for Haimo, nor should it want to. In a world saturated with data, students today feel lost without it; however, it would be a mistake to think that the vernacular of statistics is simply the language of big data. Says Haimo, “I think the problem for the humanities is you can feel like you’re not really going anywhere, and that’s very scary. You write one essay better than the other from one semester to the next. That’s not the same as, you know, being able to solve this economics problem, or code this thing, or do policy analysis.” Beyond simply the negotiation of massive amounts of data, what makes the vernacular of statistics so appealing to Haimo is a certain tangibility of skills, method, and evaluation. We needn’t be concerned here with the fact that the humanities do teach tangible skills, method, and evaluation because what’s important here is the humanities’ perceived deficit in this regard. The vernacular of statistics, while being heavily influenced by big data, is above all the vernacular of quantitative method, and although the comparison between qualitative and quantitative method is not even remotely new, the difference for today’s generation is that quantitative method is one they encounter everywhere. As Heller puts it, “On social media, and in the press that sends data visualizations skittering across it, statistics *is* now everywhere, our language for exchanging knowledge.”²³ Another way to think about this is that Heller’s generation spoke in a vernacular of reification that originated within the university while Haimo’s generation speaks in a vernacular of statistics that is omnipresent outside of the university because of tech companies and their products/services. That is to say, Haimo’s generation is fluent in the vernacular of statistics in their normal lives prior to university study.

²³ Emphasis in original.

The consequence of this is that those disciplines that use this vernacular naturally draw students to them and those disciplines that don't become suspect. Recall Haimo's claim in the quote above, where he says that, in humanities courses, "you can feel like you're not really going anywhere, and that's very scary." It doesn't take too much effort to imagine students avoiding a range of courses they see as ambiguous, or whose ends do not translate into—let alone challenge—the idiom that prevails in the world outside of the university.

Because the vernacular of statistics is already the worldview of Haimo's generation, the humanities seem out of place—and perhaps out of time—to them. Describing an exchange between him and Haimo, Heller writes,

Last summer, Haimo worked at the HistoryMakers, an organization building an archive of African American oral history. He said, "When I was applying, I kept thinking, What qualifies me for this job? Sure, I can research, I can write things.... But those skills are very difficult to demonstrate, and it's frankly not what the world at large seems in demand of.

Extraordinarily, Haimo questions his qualifications because he is suspicious of both the practicality and the value of research and writing for a history organization. But there is more to his suspicion: research and writing are not demonstrable skills. We would not be wrong to challenge Haimo's claim that research and writing are difficult skills to demonstrate, but Haimo's claim needs to be read in context. For his generation, research and writing seem "very difficult to demonstrate" because those skills are not, to use Heller's phrase, "data visualizations skittering across [social media]." Research and writing are not so much soft skills as they are invisible ones because, for whatever they can do, they cannot do what data can. It's not so much that research and writing are defective skills for Haimo so much as they are "frankly not what the world at large seems in demand of." In short, he believes them obsolete. And this coming from a history concentrator who successfully got the position! How was he qualified? How did he

demonstrate his qualifications? Why was he chosen over other students? These are questions Haimo may have asked himself while working on the oral history project, only leading to more doubt about humanistic methods of evaluation for a student raised on the vernacular of statistics.

Lurking beneath Haimo's concerns is something that lurks beneath the discourse about the humanities, especially literary study, and that is the question of rigor. This question can take many forms, but the central concern is really two-pronged: are the humanities rigorous enough when compared to STEM (or the social sciences), and how is rigor demonstrated objectively? As Sánchez Prado so aptly puts it in a recent essay, the humanities "are often seen as lacking rigor compared to fields that embrace the fiction that quantitative research and analysis is impartial and objective."²⁴ This is Haimo's line of thought when he says that "the problem with humanities courses is you can feel like you're not really going anywhere... You write one essay better than the other from one semester to the next. That's not the same as, you know, being able to solve this economics problem, or code this thing, or do policy analysis." In economics, computer science, and political science/public policy, Haimo believes there are clear markers of evaluation: students feel as if they progress consistently because they know when they get something right or wrong (the code either does what it's supposed to do or it doesn't). Policy analysis may seem to be the exception, but even if he is assuming there is some quantitative component that makes it black and white or that it follows a format rigid enough to be evaluated objectively, it is significant because it is the closest thing on the list to a traditional essay. Haimo seems to be saying that a policy analysis done for an international relations class is objective but an essay for a humanities class is not because it is subjectively evaluated. And any time evaluation is opened up to subjective judgment, the logic goes, rigor escapes because subjective

²⁴ Ignazio M. Sánchez Prado, "The Humanities Are Worth Fighting For," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 14, 2023, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-humanities-are-worth-fighting-for/>.

judgment is intangible. This, at least, is how history major Spencer Glassman frames it in a piece for *The Harvard Crimson* from which Heller quotes.²⁵ In Heller's summation, Glassman avers "that Harvard's humanities 'need to be more rigorous' because they set no standards comparable to the 'tangible things that any student who completes Stat 110 or Physics 16 must know.'" In other words, the humanities lack rigor because their standards of evaluation are intangible. But that is not all, for Glassman is actually saying something a bit more specific: the humanities lack rigor "because they set no standards comparable to the 'tangible things'" of STEM. For Glassman, it's not simply that the humanities' standards of evaluation are generally intangible, but also that they are intangible compared to the tangibility of STEM. They are, in short, intangible because of the tangibility of STEM. Haimo also makes this analytical move, diagnosing a defect in the humanities vis-à-vis STEM and the social sciences. But they line up once again when Glassman tells Heller that, in humanities courses, "one could easily walk away with an A or A-minus and not have learned anything." For both Haimo and Glassman, then, the belief that students can take humanities courses without knowing what they learned and yet still do well—an apparent impossibility in STEM courses—betrays the lack of rigor in the humanities' standards of evaluation.

The perception that the humanities are not as rigorous as STEM or the social sciences results in a push-pull effect on students as they grapple with the desire to study the humanities versus the need to study something more tangible. For example, even though Glassman complains about the humanities apparent lack of rigor, even telling Heller that "all the STEM concentrators have this attitude that humanities are a joke," he is a history major. It would be

²⁵ I'm quoting exclusively from Heller in the body of my text, but Glassman's piece can be found at Spencer W. Glassman, "A More Rigorous Humanities," *The Harvard Crimson*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.thecrimson.com/column/a-more-human-humanities/article/2021/12/10/glassman-a-more-rigorous-humanities/>. The first line is, "The humanities are easy."

wrong to assume that his complaint against the humanities is purely about status in the eyes of STEM majors, for his complaint about rigor is articulated clearly enough, but it seems just as wrong to assume that perception is irrelevant. In other words, Glassman seems to be articulating a desire both to do rigorous work and to appear to be doing rigorous work to, above all, his STEM peers. If STEM students can walk into a humanities course and “easily walk away with an A or A-minus,” but the reverse is not true, then the humanities will always be seen as lacking in rigor—as “a joke.” It is against this perception, one imagines, that Glassman felt strongly enough to write an opinion piece about rigor in the humanities; after all, literary scholar Hannah Walser seems to have done the same thing in her *Chronicle of Higher Education* article “Literary Scholars Should Argue Better,”²⁶ where she suggests that literary scholars should argue more like STEM scholars. But Glassman also has student company: lest we forget, it was Mehta, the Harvard junior who “landed uneasily in English after all,” who said, “I would never say this to any of my English- or film-major friends, but I kind of thought that those majors were a *joke*.”²⁷ Even an English major had the perception that the humanities lacked rigor, a perception she was only able to overcome by trying social studies but one that nonetheless weighs heavy on her. From within and without, it would seem, students confront the perceptions that the humanities are a joke, STEM is not a joke, and the humanities should be more like STEM.

The Professors: Hopelessness

One obvious way that professors view the ends of English differently than students is that professors attempt to understand what led to the current state of things so that they may attempt to address the problem in whatever way they can. More bluntly, students are less concerned with

²⁶ Hannah Walser, “Literary Scholars Should Argue Better,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/literary-scholars-should-argue-better>.

²⁷ Emphasis in original.

the end of English as a discipline than professors are. Students tend to grapple with the value of English, so the end of English is not at the front of their minds; on the other hand, the value of English is clear to Professors of English, so their attention is focused on how to understand and prevent the end of something they deem valuable. This tends to be the case throughout Heller's article, where professors tend to focus on diagnosing in order to treat a dying discipline, though confidence in their ability to do so is not always (or ever) there. Take Columbia English professor James Shapiro, for instance, who expresses his doubt that English can be saved: "Until about four years ago, I thought it was a reversible situation—that those who profess the humanities hadn't been good enough at selling them to students. I no longer believe that..." Shapiro is an established scholar who has also been successful in the trade press,²⁸ and it is certainly no accident that he is Heller's first professorial character in the piece. If Heller published the piece in February 2023, he likely interviewed Shapiro in 2022, meaning "until about four years ago" is around 2018. For Shapiro, then, the year 2018 is the point of no return for English. "I thought it was a reversible situation," he tells Heller, but "I no longer believe that." Interestingly, Shapiro's comments mirror those made by Eric Hayot in a 2018 article titled "The Humanities as We Know Them Are Doomed. Now What?" where he says, "There's good reason to believe the humanities aren't coming back."²⁹ However, it is crucial to understand exactly what Shapiro is saying to Heller, which is that "until about four years ago," he thought the problem was simply "that those who profess the humanities hadn't been good enough at selling them to students." But it was not a sales problem, or not only a sales problem. And it is

²⁸ Even I owned one of Shapiro's trade press books before knowing who he was. I came across his book *Shakespeare in a Divided America* (New York: Penguin, 2021) not by way of *The New York Times* or a literary publication but on a visit to my local bookstore. All this is to say that Shapiro is well-known in both academic and public literary circles. See Shapiro's personal website <https://www.jamesshapiro.net/> for more detail.

²⁹ Eric Hayot, "The Humanities as We Know Them Are Doomed. Now What?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2018, <https://www-chronicle-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/article/the-humanities-as-we-know-them-are-doomed-now-what/>.

this realization that changed his mind four years ago. As a sales problem, the decline of English was reversible; as something more severe, English is not merely in decline but also dying.

But if Shapiro no longer sees a bad sales pitch as the cause of English's death, then what does he see as the cause? The full final line of the passage above holds the key to the answer: "I no longer believe that, for two reasons." The two reasons are technology and money. Heller refers to what I'm calling technology as "the way of the world," but Shapiro is not simply referring to general change over time. He is referring specifically to technological change. As he tells Heller,

You're talking to someone who has only owned a smartphone for a year—I resisted.... Technology in the last twenty years has changed all of us.... How has it changed me? I probably read five novels a month until the two-thousands. If I read one a month now, it's a lot. That's not because I've lost interest in fiction. It's because I'm reading a hundred Web sites. I'm listening to podcasts.

Above all for Shapiro, technology has infiltrated our lives, and it not only fights for but also wins our attention. This was apparent even before purchasing a smartphone in 2018, which is significant since a smartphone is perhaps the biggest drain on our attention of any technology because it's an access point to other technologies, such as websites and podcasts. Shapiro may have been concerned with the state of English sooner had he owned a smartphone sooner, but he didn't need the smartphone to change his mind about the reversibility of English's decline.

Technology's drain on our attention and its effect on literary study were apparent to Shapiro at least since the 2010s, when his reading frequency went from "five novels a month" to "one a month." That Shapiro describes reading one book a month as "a lot" speaks to the power of technology's pull; after all, he is an English professor. What he is saying is that even he, an endowed professor of English at Columbia, cannot resist technology's draining power. "I'm reading a hundred Web sites. I'm listening to podcasts," Shapiro says, confessing that his

willpower is as good as any of ours and that, like us, he too has succumbed to the barrage of information available at our fingertips in a matter of seconds. Shapiro's realization is that technology is not just taking time away from other things or causing us to lose interest in things we used to value but is also challenging and changing our conceptions of value regarding the speed, scale, and type of information we consume. That is, it's not that we have "lost interest in fiction," only that fiction can't keep up in a world of increasing options and endless technological change. As with fiction, so with English.

However, technological change is only half the story of English's irreversible decline: the other is money. While giving Heller a brief history lesson on the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which "appropriated more than a billion dollars for education," Shapiro emphasizes that "We're not talking about elite universities—we're talking about money flowing into fifty states, all the way down. That was the beginning of the glory days of the humanities. That funding goes down. The financial support for the humanities is gone on a national level, on a state level, at the university level." Shapiro points to 1958 as "the glory days of the humanities" precisely because the influx of money into programs across the spectrum of higher education institutions fueled enrollment, teaching, and scholarship. He emphasizes that "we're not talking about elite universities" to assure Heller (and his readers) that this was a boon for all institutions. Elite universities were doing fine in the 1950s, and they will always be in a better financial position than any other colleges/universities, so to highlight "money flowing into fifty states, all the way down" is to impress upon Heller the importance that government funding has had in the life history of the humanities. When "that funding goes down," Shapiro continues, "the financial support for the humanities is gone on a national level, on a state level, at the university level." Crucially and unambiguously, Shapiro is saying that the humanities need government funding to

thrive. Without it, the humanities can only exist at elite universities, but this is clearly not ideal in Shapiro's (or anyone else's) view if "the glory days of the humanities" were only possible with the funding of non-elite programs. The humanities only can only truly thrive, in this view, when they reach all institutions of higher education nationwide. When this is not the case—when "the financial support for the humanities is gone" at every level—then the humanities decay, which is exactly the reality they face today. Insofar as the humanities can exist at elite universities and nowhere else, they can only do so in an anachronistic form, a form that would be hardly desirable after the lifeblood given to them by the post-1958 glory days.

Furthermore, for Shapiro, it is no coincidence that the evisceration of support for humanities programs mirrors another phenomenon: the decline of democracy. To help himself tell Heller about the history of funding for the humanities that began with the National Defense Education Act, Shapiro draws "a graph with two axes and an upside-down parabola." The graph is nothing more than a sketch on the back of a random piece of paper, but it's enough to get his point across to Heller. It also unwittingly leads Shapiro to a realization: the upside-down parabola "is also the decline-of-democracy chart. You can overlay it on the money chart like a kind of palimpsest—it's the same." There are two important things that we can take from Shapiro's comparison. First, the comparison between the decline of the humanities and the decline of democracy is not based on facts as such. Beyond Shapiro whipping up a graph on the spot, which could be from a graph he has already seen or simply from his perception of events over the last several decades, the graph he draws could represent any number of things. An upside-down parabola that can be overlaid "like a kind of palimpsest" isn't proof of any causal connection between the decline of funding for the humanities and the decline of democracy. Of course, that is precisely why it is significant: it doesn't need to be true. Perception—facilitated

significantly enough by a form of data visualization—is enough to claim equivalence and establish a position in defense of the humanities. And this position is the second important thing from Shapiro’s comparison, for it is clear that by associating the decline of the humanities with the decline of democracy, he is suggesting that the decline of one has caused the decline of the other. Whether he thinks a lack of funding for the humanities caused the decline of democracy or vice versa is unclear (though the former seems more correct), but it is also irrelevant. For Shapiro, the link between the two is enough for comment, and aware that any of his conversation with Heller could be published, he may have wanted to get others to make the connection also. Although equating more humanities with more democracy is simplistic, it is not a new argument. The humanities have long been—and perhaps have always been—rhetorically associated with the formation of democratic citizens,³⁰ but the counterargument is also weathered. Indeed, both sides of the argument persist because it is not an argument of truth but of belief and perspective. If it’s even possible to relate the humanities to democracy in statistical form,³¹ it would need to be so simplistic that it could only be represented in a haphazard sketch on a sheet of scratch paper. In other words, Shapiro *believes* or *appears to believe* that the humanities are inextricably linked to democracy—a belief likely shared by most humanities scholars—and this connection is meant to highlight the importance of the humanities to the proper functioning of democracy. The truth of this connection is irrelevant if Shapiro gets others to think about or believe it.

Still, there is another possible interpretation if one reads Shapiro’s concern with the humanities and democracy in the context of Heller’s article overall. At least one effect of the

³⁰ For a somewhat recent example, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³¹ My suspicion of possibility rests on definitions and components of the humanities and democracy. Take the humanities, for example, which at the level of values (at least rhetorically) get inflated to humanism and at the level of skills get simplified to things that are often not exclusive to the humanities (e.g. close reading).

article is to show a certain desperation and befuddlement among English professors about what is happening to their discipline. So rather than being a clever addition to his conversation with Heller, which he'd know would be published in *The New Yorker*, Shapiro's comment relating the decline of funding for the humanities and the decline of democracy can be read as a desperate attempt to prove relevance to millions of readers nationwide. Even if that wasn't his intention, it can certainly be read that way in Heller's telling, which has the quote close out the second section of the article as well as Shapiro's cameo. Does Shapiro actually believe in the connection between the humanities and democracy, or does he simply not know what else to say at this point? Is exaggeration the language of desperation? It certainly seems plausible when Harvard English professors tell Heller, "We feel we're on the Titanic."³² But desperation is only one indication of an attempt to contend with the end of something dear to us: confusion is the other. When Shapiro says, "You can overlay [the decline-of-democracy chart] on the money chart like a kind of palimpsest—it's the same," he is at one level reflecting on the startling similarity between the two charts and how that similarity should speak for itself. Yet it doesn't. Recognizing that the two charts are identical is not enough to save the humanities or speak to their value; if it were, it would hardly need to be said at all. The imperative "it's the same" is the mark of befuddlement—at how the humanities and democracy have both declined, at how the decline is irreversible, or, above all, at how democracy and the humanities share the same fate.

The Professors: Grappling with the Present

Confusion is neither exclusive to Shapiro nor to the connection between the humanities and democracy; in fact, confusion characterizes many professors trying to cope with the end/ends of English. One major confusion is how the subjects found meaningful by English departments

³² This quote is attributed to "a senior professor in the English department."

and today's university students align significantly yet this parallelism does not translate to more English majors. As Heller puts it, "English professors find the turn [away from English] particularly baffling: a moment when, by most appearances, the appetite for public contemplation of language, identity, historiography, and other longtime concerns of the seminar table is at a peak." The bafflement comes from that belief that, if the current generation of students is interested in "language, identity, historiography, and other longtime concerns of the seminar table" in their non-academic lives, then they should be more willing to enroll in English courses or declare English as a major. But the numbers tell another story. "From fifteen years ago to the start of the pandemic," Heller informs us about Harvard, "the number of English majors reportedly declined by about three-quarters—in 2020, there were fewer than sixty at a college of more than seven thousand." That is, the exact opposite of what professors would expect is taking place: the generation of students whose interests correspond most to those of the English department has given the department its lowest enrollment numbers ever. Although one part of this divergence is supported by numbers (enrollment), the other (student interests) is supported by assumptions. For instance, Harvard English professor Amanda Claybaugh, who is also the Dean of Undergraduate Education, tells Heller, "Young people are very, very concerned about the ethics of representation, of cultural interaction—all these kinds of things that, actually, we think about a lot." On one level, we could challenge Claybaugh and say that her assumptions about what students are interested in are wrong, for if "all these kinds of things" are actually the subjects "young people are very, very concerned about," then why the divergence in interest and enrollment? On another level, though, we could say Claybaugh's claims about student interests are right but challenge her assumption about the ability of English to satisfy those interests. Instead of asking why students are not majoring in English, we can reverse the question and ask

why English is not appealing to students. Better still: why is English not as appealing as other subjects that also deal with “the ethics of representation, of cultural interaction”? In the end, a multitude of questions may be necessary to mitigate the confusion over the divergence between a generation seemingly suited to study English and that generation’s refusal to study it.

For professors of English at Harvard, however, one explanation for this generation’s rejection of English seems clear: a staunch presentism. When introducing Claybaugh, Heller writes, “She was one of several teachers who described an orientation toward the present, to the extent that many students lost their bearings in the past.” For Claybaugh and others, then, today’s students are uninterested in majoring in English because they are uninterested in the past. If English looks to the past while students look “toward the present,” it may feel anachronistic to today’s students even if their interests align with the concerns of English departments. This, for English professors, must explain the exodus, and their classroom experiences would seem to support this. As Claybaugh tells Heller, “The last time I taught ‘The Scarlet Letter,’ I discovered that my students were really struggling to understand the sentences as sentences—like, having trouble identifying the subject and the verb. Their capacities are different, and the nineteenth century is a long time ago.” A fissure in Claybaugh’s explanation reveals a significant feature of English professors’ understanding of the exodus from English. To be sure, she does admit that “the nineteenth century is a long time ago,” suggesting that students may just be uninterested in nineteenth-century American literature or that nineteenth-century sentences are just harder to read, but this claim is merely tangential to a more pressing concern: that “capacities are different” in today’s students. In trying to suggest that students are lost to the present, Claybaugh reveals a certain disappointment about skills and abilities that don’t necessarily have a relation to “an orientation toward the present.” Nineteenth-century prose may in fact be harder to read than

captions in TikTok videos, but Claybaugh specifies that what she is talking about is that “students were really struggling with sentences as sentences—like, having trouble identifying the subject and the verb.” This is not a concern about “lost bearings in the past” but about lost skills. The fissure, then, is that what Claybaugh is saying about today’s students is less that students are uninterested in the past and more that students are less capable of studying the past than previous generations. Blackwood counters this viewpoint, claiming her students handle difficult nineteenth-century texts just fine,³³ but the fissure in Claybaugh’s explanation reveals a deeper issue: a divergence is widening between English and today’s students because literary study requires a certain set of skills that is increasingly removed from the skills of today’s students (and perhaps even those required of them by future employers). This doesn’t mean students today are in fact interested in the past but rather that explanations about why they are not enrolling in English courses or declaring English as a major need to extend beyond the discipline itself. If students are suffering from a form of presentism, then it is at minimum a presentism where “an orientation toward the present” describes not just an attitude about the (un)importance of the past but also a judgment about which skills are deemed important and necessary today.

Nevertheless, the belief that students disown the past in favor of the present is a concern English professors will need to confront more frequently as students focus more attention on preparing for a job market that prioritizes skills and ways of thinking associated with STEM disciplines. Attention to issues external to the discipline must be taken seriously, in other words, but this does not mean that nothing is internal to English’s problems as well. In fact, in order to suggest its relevance to students, university administrators, and the general public (which of course includes alumni, parents, and investors), English must articulate its relevance in relation

³³ Blackwood, “Letter from an English Department on the Brink.”

to other disciplines and external issues like job preparation; to do this, it must first articulate its relevance internally—what it tells itself and its students. Therefore, if English is concerned with the past but the current generation of students is not, then it needs to articulate the past’s relevance to the present in a way that is convincing to students. More precisely, it needs to articulate the past’s relevance from the perspective of today’s students. As Jesse Alemán writes in a recent piercing article for *PMLA*, “The last few year years of racial upheaval, political plague, and a fast-moving health crisis... have urgently pressured English studies to show its social worth.”³⁴ Contra Shapiro, then, English’s sales problem hasn’t disappeared.

Assistant Professor of English Tara K. Menon seems to understand from experience the need to articulate English’s social worth to today’s generation: in Heller’s telling, she “linked the shift [from interest in the past to the present] to students arriving at college with a sense that the unenlightened past had nothing left to teach.” It is this perspective from which English needs to articulate its end—to students especially but also to itself. Menon is aware of the importance of matching her discipline’s needs with student desires, but instead of sacrificing the past to the present (i.e. sacrificing literary studies as practiced to opposing student interests), she unifies them into a mutually reinforcing relationship. As she describes it,

There’s a real misunderstanding that you can come in and say, “I want to read post-colonial texts—that’s the thing I want to study—and I have no interest in studying the work of dead white men.” My answer, in the big first lecture that I give, is, If you want to understand Arundhati Roy, or Salman Rushdie, or Zadie Smith, you have to read Dickens. Because one of the tragedies of the British Empire ... is that all those writers read all those books.

Menon doesn’t brush off the students who tell her, “I have no interest in studying the work of dead white men”; instead, she accepts their desire to read postcolonial authors, but caveats that by telling them they cannot only read those authors. Or they can, but doing so would be an

³⁴ Jesse Alemán, “The End of English,” *PMLA* 136, no. 3 (2021): 472, doi:10.1632/S0030812921000237.

incomplete reading of figures like Roy, Rushdie, and Smith since “all those writers read all those books.” Just like that, then, Menon ties the department’s needs and beliefs about what an education in literary study should look like to the desires and beliefs of today’s students. Importantly, the students Menon is referring to are students interested in reading literature, but they express reservations about the type of literature they are expected to read. Menon doesn’t force a certain idea of English on them, which may have the effect of pushing them to other fields of study, but links their interests inextricably with those of the department. In doing so, she links the past to the present, forcing students to contend with the idea that the present can’t make complete sense without an understanding of the past. In other words, Menon is turning students’ assumptions back on themselves by saying that, without an understanding of “the unenlightened past” and its effect on the present, the present itself would be unenlightened. As a young professor, Menon’s line of thinking here can perhaps be traced to her generational proximity to the students of today, but there’s another explanation that is equally likely. Menon received her graduate education throughout the “crisis” of English and other humanities majors that, at least in Heller’s telling, really begins in 2012.³⁵ It seems more than plausible, then, that she knows the importance of connecting what English does to student concerns in a way that establishes the value of literary study while also drawing students to it, or rather, in a way that establishes the value of literary study in order to draw students to it. Menon’s tactic highlights the importance of the past while recognizing the demands of the present in a way meant to reproduce the discipline.

³⁵ Menon received her MA in 2014 and her PhD in 2019. See her Harvard faculty bio at <https://english.fas.harvard.edu/people/tara-k-menon>. Heller opens his article with 2012 as an important marker: “The crisis, when it came, arrived so quickly that its scale was hard to recognize at first. From 2012 to the start of the pandemic...” Five paragraphs later, he cites data from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ Humanities Indicators project that spans 2012 to 2020.

The Professors: By Any Means Necessary

Although seemingly necessary to forestall the end of English, Menon's tactic is not the only one put in service of reproducing the discipline. At ASU, assistant professor of English Brandi Adams adopts the opposite strategy by adjusting her syllabus to student preferences. For example, Heller recounts a visit to Adams's classroom one day at the end of the term when she is recapping what they read in her "Introduction to Literary Studies" course. After she lists off the readings, which include authors like Jane Austen, Fernando Flores, and Victoria Chang, the following exchange occurs:

"It has given me the opportunity to think about what we did and didn't like. I think I might remove 'Persuasion.' What do you think? Keep it or ditch it?"

"I say ditch it," a student said.

"Should I substitute another Jane Austen novel?" Adams asked.

"I like 'Pride and Prejudice,'" a student offered.

"So everyone's just, like, You picked the wrong one?" Adams asked. She shrugged.

"Persuasion' is gone."

To be clear, there are eleven students in the course. This isn't a department-wide survey or a vote at a department town hall. This is a small group of students who are enrolled in the course for one term, yet these students' preferences will change the course for the next iteration. If the pattern holds, the students in each iteration of the course will determine what the next one reads. Whether this sounds productive or not, a couple of questions arise. One is whether this tactic is any different from how instructors already alter course material. Course evaluations typically ask opinions on which course readings worked and which didn't,³⁶ so as a tactic to save English from its end, it would appear unhelpful since it is already the status quo. Heller follows up the exchange with Adams and her students by saying, "Her approach reflects a wider effort at ASU to meet students in their interests," but is asking what students would change at the end of the

³⁶ In my experience, this is the one question instructors personally ask students to put some thought into.

course reflective of that effort? This is where the second question comes in: what really can be determined about student interests from an end-of-term casual questioning? The two student responses to Adams's question were nothing more than "I say ditch it" and "I like 'Pride and Prejudice.'" Adams neither asked the students to elaborate nor questioned their responses: she simply accepted two sentences as indicative of student interests and made the change. The problem here once again is that, as a tactic to save English, this doesn't seem like it will move the needle much. Is this really about student interests, or is it simply appearing to be about student interests? The burden isn't on Adams necessarily but on her department, which may believe that it is responding to student interests by the method Adams uses in the above exchange but is instead allowing a performance of responding to stand in for any real change. This may seem overstated, but notice that the effort to accommodate student interests that this exchange is meant to represent is a choice between two Jane Austen novels. How much change is the exchange in Adams's classroom really meant to produce?

Crucially, Heller uses this exchange to lead into a discussion about ASU's attempt to offer an education that meets student demands. But, as I've suggested, there is a disjuncture between meeting students in their interests and the attempts taken to do that. The disjuncture even holds at the administrative level, where articulations of the attempt to adapt to student interests are barely comprehensible. Take Jeffrey Cohen, for instance, an English professor who is also the Dean of Humanities at ASU: he tells Heller, "Instead of a teacher telling you why it might be relevant, but there doesn't seem to be any connection to your lived experience, I think it's important to have every model of learning available to every student." The assumption here is that "every model of learning" is capable of meeting or matching "lived experience," but this seems more idealistic than realistic. All one needs to do is reread the Adams exchange to see

how this breaks down. What “model of learning” is being used to approach “lived experience” when the students are being asked to choose between two Jane Austen novels? The point is not to bash Jane Austen novels or their relevance to American students in the twenty-first century; instead, the point is to question whether the methods being used to accommodate student interests or make “every model of learning available to every student” are actually doing those things. The desire to match the curriculum to lived experience may certainly be genuine, but desire is neither a replacement for substantial change nor a reason to believe that all change is productive. What’s more, student interests may not even be primarily about matching the curriculum to their lived experience. If the students interviewed by Heller are any indication, students seem most concerned with skills transfer and job prospects in the future, not lived experience. Questions of the curriculum’s relation to student interests come primarily from faculty perspectives, as Claybaugh and Menon show, but this may come down to the fact that students who have already decided to major in English (the students Claybaugh and Menon seem to be referring to) may be more concerned with the curriculum’s relation to their lived experience than other students. However, if the key to saving English is bringing in new students, then skills transfer and job prospects need to be the priority because those are the things students seem to be most interested in. After all, when the marketing firm ASU hired to “sell the humanities better” surveyed over eight hundred students about the humanities, Cohen learned that students “were unclear on what the humanities were” even though “they loved the humanities and rated them higher than their other courses.” How can students feel as if the humanities curriculum is failing to approach their lived experience if they do not know what the humanities are? For students outside of the humanities, the first concern almost necessarily has to be skills and jobs because that is the more commonly perceived deficit outside of the

humanities. This seems to be the case from the survey results, which showed that “students ... had no idea which careers humanities study led to,” leading Cohen “to teach a course called Making a Career with a Humanities Major.” Whatever student interests actually are, it’s telling that the clearest intervention in the curricular status quo at ASU is a course dedicated to careers in the humanities even as the rhetoric about student interests (from the same person) hovers around “lived experience” and “every model of learning.”

Part of the incomprehensibility of articulations at change rest on an issue that runs through Heller’s article and, by extension, this essay: how and where to limit our understanding of the problem and how and where to intervene. Put another way, are the problems in Heller’s article unique to English, representative of the humanities, or a symptom of problems facing higher education—or even democratic culture—as a whole? Even from Heller’s brief report, it would seem that all are true to some extent, yet the burden has fallen on English to defend itself, define its purpose, and change (or not change) its functioning to meet the demands of students, university administrators, and society. Some English departments are more willing and better positioned to do this because of funding and infrastructure, but survival instinct and situational awareness also play a role. As Heller writes,

At ASU, the English department has been wondering whether even to keep calling itself the English department. “More and more students come to the discipline not necessarily to take courses in literature,” Devoney Looser, a professor and an Austen scholar, told me. They’re curious about creative writing, or media studies, or they follow other beacons.

It may seem absurd that ASU’s English department has been contemplating a name change, but if perception plays a crucial role in the fate of academic literary study, then rebranding itself could have significant effects on the survival of the discipline. However, Looser highlights that the change would need to be more than one in name only because the discipline is already

confronting an increasing number of students interested in taking English courses that move beyond literature. Indeed, the departmental name change is important but so is a substantive change in the curriculum. Both changes would have the important effect of distancing the English department from narrow understandings of literature in order to save literary studies as a discipline (and a profession). The idea seems to be less about pushing out literature than expanding the confines of the discipline, but as long as the English department calls itself thus, the worry is that it will primarily be associated with the study of literature.

We might question what definition of literature is being used here, but what Looser's quote suggests is that, regardless of the definition one chooses, students perceive a lack: English only offers "courses in literature," but they want more. A quick glance at almost any English department's website will show that English departments today already study more than novels, poems, short stories, and plays³⁷—what we might imagine as a student's narrow understanding of literature—but the perception of English has not changed along with its reality.³⁸ English is literature, literature is English. The only way to break this exclusive association, then, is to change both sides of the equation to something less specific. Students are already coming to the discipline with interests in "creative writing, or media studies, or... other beacons," things which English departments are often already equipped to teach, but the question for ASU at least is not really a matter of whether it can change but how it will change. More specifically, the question is: what form will the English department take once it sheds its former identity as the department of literature? Whatever it is, it needs to be one that appears new or at least substantially different from its former self. Looser hopes English departments are up for the task—as she tells Heller,

³⁷ A quick glance at the University of Chicago English department's faculty page shows that scholars are working with video games, virtual reality, and movement as objects of study.

³⁸ English departments in the United States have worked beyond the confines of literature for some time, but attention to English's object of study has taken on a new importance in the "end of English" discourse.

“This is a moment where we might be in a position to reimagine ourselves”—but it may require a type of reimagining that ultimately argues against the very need for English’s autonomy, an autonomy that its singular association with literature usually gives it.

But the dissolution of departmental barriers among humanities disciplines may be inevitable if survival is of primary concern (and of course it is). Without departments fusing together, universities may simply let them die, letting forms of knowledge and the jobs that sustain them disappear from university intellectual life and curriculum. Fusing, on the other hand, although a sacrifice of autonomy, allows disciplinary knowledge (and jobs) to continue in some form, at least for now. For example, speaking about ASU’s situation, Heller writes, “Some humanities departments at ASU have gathered into schools of loose affiliation, following a fashion for ‘unbundling,’ or breaking departmental barriers to let students mold study to their needs.” To be sure, the “fashion for ‘unbundling’” is not a fashion as such but a need; that is, departments didn’t start unbundling “for the sake of change itself” but because it allowed them to reach more students and monetize their services (more on that shortly).³⁹ By rebalancing the burden of curriculum selection from departments to students, the logic goes, humanities disciplines put themselves in a better position to continue to teach and produce scholarship. After all, students may be more willing to major in the humanities if they can “mold study to their needs” and interests, which could have the double effect of appealing to students already considering majors in the humanities and those interested but unsure if the humanities can meet their needs. However, the situation that the humanities face today means that every decision, including “breaking departmental barriers,” is more than an attempt to reproduce disciplinary knowledge: it is also an attempt to create value. As ASU history professor Catherine O’Donnell

³⁹ This is one of the more succinct definitions of fashion in Lars Svendsen, *Fashion: A Philosophy*, trans. John Irons (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 16.

confesses to Heller, “The idealistic part is: Can we reach people who might otherwise not get any higher education? The vulgar part is: Can we monetize the bits and pieces?” Both questions are questions of value. One is concerned with adding value to someone’s intellectual and professional life through a humanities degree, and one is concerned with extracting monetary value from that same enterprise. What O’Donnell is saying is that, at ASU today, these two questions are inseparable. “Breaking departmental barriers to let students mold study to their needs” is an attempt to reproduce disciplinary knowledge by both adding and extracting value. In other words, the humanities today must be both “idealistic” and “vulgar” if they hope to avoid an otherwise certain end.

Conclusion

Importantly, O’Donnell reminds us that the question of value, or worth, is not something unique to the humanities, even if the humanities are representative of it. In her final quote in the article, she says, “Everyone is going to be hoisted on this petard, because, as we instrumentalize higher education, students question the whole bundling of a B.A.: Is a college education ‘worth’ it? Is a humanities degree ‘worth’ it? The humanities are going to be the little bird on the hippo,” with Heller adding after an em-dash, “an afterthought trying to balance on other educational goals.” Even though the humanities take the brunt of the assault here, it is significant that O’Donnell suggests how simply one can jump from questioning the value of a humanities degree to questioning the value of any university degree. What makes the jump so simple for her is the instrumentalization of higher education: once this happens, questions of value will spread from one area to another until the entire university is questioned. “Is a humanities degree ‘worth’ it?” is not a difference of question in kind from “Is a college education ‘worth’ it?” but a difference of question in scale, as the metaphor of “the little bird on the hippo” makes plain. Once the

humanities are “an afterthought,” though, questions of value do not also become an afterthought but rather turn toward those areas that Heller calls “other educational goals.” However much it is used to do so, instrumentalizing higher education isn’t code for gutting the humanities, at least not exclusively; rather, it is code for constantly questioning the value of all disciplines and university processes in relation to whatever university goals are most important at any given time. Once the humanities are gone, there will be other educational goals to question, and throughout, as the university questions the value of everything within its walls, its value will also be questioned. Forget the bird; who needs the hippo anymore when the elephant can get me to the same place with less effort, debt, and time? Above all, it is this conflation of departments, divisions, and universities heading toward an ultimate shared fate that O’Donnell’s comment highlights. It is this, too, that allows us to think beyond the singular fates of English departments, the humanities, and universities, for whether we are talking about the ends of English departments or the humanities or universities, what we are really talking about is perceptions of value and how these perceptions impose themselves onto the material world. What does declining enrollment signify, and who determines this meaning? Is enrollment even declining? What actions does the claim of declining enrollment produce? How do these actions reinforce or produce new perceptions of value? These questions will not end with English. And although we may agree with Aléman when he says that “English departments are already living relics in curriculum, graduate preparation, and deep-rooted methods,”⁴⁰ O’Donnell reminds us of the likely possibility that English’s present is the rest of the university’s future.

In the end, Heller’s interviews with students and faculty show that, if the end of English is on the horizon, it is at least partly the result of a divergence in perceptions of English’s value.

⁴⁰ Aléman, “The End of English,” 472.

On the one hand, students see English as irrelevant, lacking in rigor, and poor preparation for today's job market. In many ways, it is a symbol of the past. For professors, English's connection to the past through its objects of study and the skills required to analyze them is what makes it valuable and indispensable. It may seem obvious and perhaps uncritical to say that students are concerned with the future and professors are concerned with the past (the cultural past and their discipline's past), but as universities become more corporatized and thus inherently forward-looking, the past will inevitably become an outcast and an obstacle. And English, as a symbol of the anachronism and a synecdoche for the humanities, will take the brunt of the assault from the champions of the future who wave the banners of instrumentalization and monetization. One might be tempted to throw the blame on Heller for painting English's woes in too simplistic a form, but what Heller's reporting reveals is a version of what Aaron Hanlon calls a "credibility crisis" facing the humanities.⁴¹ For Hanlon, the credibility crisis puts the humanities against a wall where they must choose between institutionalization and academic protocol on the one hand and politics and morality on the other. Heller's version of this is what might productively be called a crisis of temporality, and English must choose between the past and the future. If it chooses the past, its place in the university may in fact end, but, as Hanlon suggests, this would allow it to focus on cultivating its ends, whatever those may be.

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⁴¹ Aaron Hanlon, "The Humanities Are Facing a Credibility Crisis" *Washington Post*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/04/15/humanities-sciences-credibility-crisis-public-trust/>.

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