

The New York Review of Books

What Are We Doing Here?

Marilynne Robinson

NOVEMBER 9, 2017 ISSUE

I have been reading lately about the rise of humanism in Europe. The old scholars often described themselves as “ravished” by one of the books newly made available to them by the press, perhaps also by translation. Their lives were usually short, never comfortable. I think about what it would have been like to read by the light of an oil lamp, to write with a goose quill. It used to seem to me that an unimaginable self-discipline must account for their meticulous learnedness. I assumed that the rigors and austerities of their early training had made their discomforts too familiar to be noticed. Now increasingly I think they were held to their work by a degree of fascination, of sober delight, that we can no longer imagine.

John Milton said, “As good almost kill a man as kill a good book.” He was arguing, unsuccessfully, against licensing, the suppression or censoring of books before publication. This was usual in the premodern and early modern world, of course. How many good books were killed outright by these means we will never know, even granting the labors of printers who defied the threat of hair-raising punishments to publish unlicensed work, which others risked hair-raising penalties to own or to read.

To put books into English, the vulgar tongue, the language of the masses, was once radical. Teaching literature written in English is a recent innovation, historically speaking, and was long regarded in the more renowned institutions as a lowering of standards. It is still the case in some countries that the work of living writers is excluded from the curriculum, perhaps a sign of lingering prejudice against the vernacular, against what people say and think now, in the always disparaged present. In America this scruple is gone and forgotten. Writers not yet dead, in many cases only emerging, are read and pondered, usually under a rubric of some kind that makes them representative of gender or ethnicity or region, therefore instances of some perspective or trend often of greater interest to the professor than to any of the writers.



Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon/Erich Lessing/Art Resource

Alexis de Tocqueville; portrait by Théodore Chassériau, 1850

These categories, woman or black or immigrant, can be encumbrances from the writers' point of view, obstacles to the reading of their work as something more than sociological data. If there are courses explicitly attentive to white men as a subgroup I have never heard of any. Male and white is still the default where literature is concerned, in the academy, at least. This is not the fault of any of these men, and they should not be undervalued or misread on this account. But knowing what a book costs any writer, in years not least, I hope for the day when all good books can be read as speaking in as broad a voice, engaged with the Great Questions.

However, I am too aware of the ragged beast history has been to fret over the fact that its manners are not perfect yet. I think it is most excellent that so many voices are being heard, and that the ongoing life of this endless human work is acknowledged as it is being written. This has supported the teaching of writing that is so widespread in American universities. These same living writers come into the universities to lecture and teach, as the great literary figures whose writing is consecrated by time could not do, even if they wished. This is in effect a system of patronage that leaves no one beholden, and that makes thousands of students aware that writers are not so unlike themselves—a valuable stimulus to aspiration.

All this works rather well. It has given me an interesting life, allowing me all the time a novel requires and every resource for following the questions that arise as I work. I have enjoyed the company of young writers, and I have learned from them. I know that one is expected to bemoan the present time, to say something about decline and the loss of values. *O tempora, o mores!* But I find a great deal to respect.

That said. It is a familiar irony that prohibition and deprivation can make things potent and ravishing, and that plenty very often dulls our taste for them. There is a great deal of questioning now of the value of the humanities, those aptly named disciplines that make us consider what human beings have been, and are, and will be. Sometimes I think they should be renamed Big Data. These catastrophic wars that afflict so much of the world now surely bear more resemblance to the Hundred Years' War or the Thirty Years' War or the wars of Napoleon or World War I than they do to any expectations we have had about how history would unfold in the modern period, otherwise known as those few decades we call the postwar.

We have thought we were being cynical when we insisted that people universally are motivated by self-interest. Would God it were true! Hamlet's rumination on the twenty thousand men going off to fight over a territory not large enough for them all to be buried in, going to their graves as if to their beds, shows a much sounder grasp of human behavior than this. It acknowledges a part of it that shows how absurdly optimistic our "cynicism" actually is. President Obama not long ago set off a kerfuffle among the press by saying that these firestorms of large-scale violence and destruction are not unique to Islamic culture or to the present time. This is simple fact, and it is also fair warning, if we hope to keep our own

actions and reactions within something like civilized bounds. This would be one use of history.

And here's another. We might stop persuading ourselves of the truth of notions that are flatly implausible in light of all we know, or could know if we cared to. Then we would be less confident in imposing our assumptions on behavior, including our own, that they cannot help us interpret. The aversion to history shelters some very important errors, and sometimes does so aggressively. A society is moving toward dangerous ground when loyalty to the truth is seen as disloyalty to some supposedly higher interest. How many times has history taught us this?

In the realm of contemporary politics, someone who has a certain awareness of history, the president, for example, is expected to speak as if he did not. He is expected to have mastery of an artificial language, a language made up arbitrarily of the terms and references of a nonexistent world that is conjured out of prejudice and nostalgia and mis- and disinformation, as well as of fashion and slovenliness among the opinion makers. Any dialect becomes second nature to those who live among its speakers, and this one is pervasive in ordinary educated life. Anyone who has wandered now and then into the vast arcana of what we have been and done is prone to violating the dialect's strict and narrow usage, and will be corrected.

I am not speaking here of the usual and obvious malefactors, the blowhards on the radio and on cable television. I am speaking of the mainstream media, therefore of the institutions that educate most people of influence in America, including journalists. Our great universities, with their vast resources, their exhaustive libraries, look like a humanist's dream. Certainly, with the collecting and archiving that has taken place in them over centuries, they could tell us much that we need to know. But there is pressure on them now to change fundamentally, to equip our young to be what the Fabians used to call "brain workers." They are to be skilled laborers in the new economy, intellectually nimble enough to meet its needs, which we know will change constantly and unpredictably. I may simply have described the robots that will be better suited to this kind of existence, and with whom our optimized workers will no doubt be forced to compete, poor complex and distractible creatures that they will be still.

Why teach the humanities? Why study them? American universities are literally shaped around them and have been since their founding, yet the question is put in the bluntest form—what are they good for? If, for purposes of discussion, we date the beginning of the humanist movement to 1500, then, historically speaking, the West has flourished materially as well as culturally in the period of their influence. You may have noticed that the United States is always in an existential struggle with an imagined competitor. It may have been the cold war that instilled this habit in us. It may have been nineteenth-century nationalism, when America was coming of age and competition among the great powers of Europe drove world events. Whatever etiology is proposed for it, whatever excuse is made for it, however

rhetorically useful it may be in certain contexts, the habit is deeply harmful, as it has been in Europe as well, when the competition involved the claiming and defending of colonies, as well as militarization that led to appalling wars.

The consequences of these things abide. We see and feel them every day. The standards that might seem to make societies commensurable are essentially meaningless, except when they are ominous. Insofar as we treat them as real, they mean that other considerations are put out of account. Who died in all those wars? The numbers lost assure us that there were artists and poets and mathematicians among them, and statesmen, though at best their circumstances may never have allowed them or us to realize their gifts.

What was lost to those colonizations? The many regions that bore the brunt of them struggle to discover a social order they can accept as legitimate and authoritative, with major consequences for the old colonizers and the whole world. Who loses in these economic competitions? Those who win, first of all, because the foot soldiers of those economies work too much for meagre, even uncertain pay and are exposed to every insult this cheapening of fundamental value visits on the earth and the air. How many artists and scientists ought there to be among those vast legions? And among their threatened children? There is a genius for impoverishment always at work in the world. And it has its way, as if its proceedings were not only necessary, but even sensible. Its rationale, its battle cry, is Competition.

A great irony is at work in our historical moment. We are being encouraged to abandon our most distinctive heritage—in the name of self-preservation. The logic seems to go like this: To be as strong as we need to be we must have a highly efficient economy. Society must be disciplined, stripped down, to achieve this efficiency and to make us all better foot soldiers. The alternative is decadence, the eclipse of our civilization by one with more fire in its belly. We are to be prepared to think very badly of our antagonist, whichever one seems to loom at a given moment. It is a convention of modern literature, and of the going-on of talking heads and public intellectuals, to project what are said to be emerging trends into a future in which cultural, intellectual, moral, and economic decline will have hit bottom, more or less.

Somehow this kind of talk always seems brave and deep. The specifics concerning this abysmal future are vague—Britain will cease to be Britain, America will cease to be America, France will cease to be France, and so on, depending on which country happens to be the focus of Spenglerian gloom. The oldest literature of radical pessimism can be read as prophecy. Of course these three societies have changed profoundly in the last hundred years, the last fifty years, and few with any knowledge of history would admit to regretting the change. What is being invoked is the notion of a precious and unnamable essence, second nature to some, in the marrow of their bones, in effect. By this view others, whether they will or no, cannot understand or value it, and therefore they are a threat.

The definitions of “some” and “others” are unclear and shifting. In America, since we are an immigrant country, our “nativists” may be first- or second-generation Americans whose

parents or grandparents were themselves considered suspect on these same grounds. It is almost as interesting as it is disheartening to learn that nativist rhetoric can have impact in a country where precious few can claim to be native in any ordinary sense. Our great experiment has yielded some valuable results—here a striking demonstration of the emptiness of such rhetoric, which is nevertheless loudly persistent in certain quarters in America, and which obviously continues to be influential in Britain and Europe.

Nativism is always aligned with an impulse or strategy to shape the culture with which it claims to have this privileged intimacy. It is urgently intent on identifying enemies and confronting them, and it is hostile to the point of loathing toward aspects of the society that are taken to show their influence. In other words, these lovers of country, these patriots, are wildly unhappy with the country they claim to love, and are bent on remaking it to suit their own preferences, which they feel no need to justify or even fully articulate. Neither do they feel any need to answer the objections of those who see their shaping and their disciplining as mutilation.

What is at stake now, in this rather inchoate cluster of anxieties that animates so many of us, is the body of learning and thought we call the humanities. Their transformative emergence has historically specifiable origins in the English and European Renaissance, greatly expedited by the emergence of the printing press. At the time and for centuries afterward it amounted to very much more than the spread of knowledge, because it was understood as a powerful testimony to human capacities, human grandeur, the divine in the human. And it had the effect of awakening human capacities that would not otherwise have been imagined.

Alexis de Tocqueville, an early and enduring interpreter of American civilization, published his great *Democracy in America*, in two volumes, in 1835 and 1840. He was interested in the new society for its implications for civilization in Europe, especially France. His treatment of it is equable and perceptive, though he does have his doubts. Speaking in his introduction of the effects of the spread of learning in the countries of the West, he says:

From the moment when the exercise of intelligence had become a source of strength and wealth, each step in the development of science, each new area of knowledge, each fresh idea had to be viewed as a seed of power placed within people's grasp. Poetry, eloquence, memory, the beauty of wit, the fires of imagination, the depth of thought, all these gifts which heaven shares out by chance turned to the advantage of democracy and, even when they belonged to the enemies of democracy, they still promoted its cause by highlighting the natural grandeur of man. Its victories spread, therefore, alongside those of civilization and education. Literature was an arsenal open to all, where the weak and the poor could always find arms.

This passage provides a sense of what became newly available to respect and admiration as knowledge spread through the populace—poetry, eloquence, wit, imagination, depth of

thought—where they would not have been seen or acknowledged in earlier generations. The old humanist joy in what people are still abides in Tocqueville, and he draws a humanist conclusion about the brilliance of people simply as such. Walt Whitman wrote, “I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/and what I assume you shall assume,/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” Any excellence, while it is given by heaven, more or less at random from the world’s perspective, is testimony to the fact that human beings are endowed with a capacity for excellence, whatever form it takes in any individual case. Their natural grandeur, which is overturning the old order, is not a matter of political or economic power, which according to Tocqueville are a consequence of the emergence of these gifts and secondary to them. The splendor of the gifts themselves, as they are liberated by new areas of knowledge, by fresh ideas, makes the case for democracy.



Walt Whitman; drawing by David Levine

It is to be noted that these gifts are highly individual. There is no talk here of the folk, or the masses, though the transformation of society Tocqueville describes has potential for a radical, progressive overturning. There is no suggestion that those who are rising can or should be shaped or led toward participation in a benign new order foreseen either by them or for them. The social order is forming itself around change brought about by these individual expressions of a collective grandeur. Tocqueville sees something like inspiration sweeping through the West as knowledge spreads and science advances. Crucially, there is no mention of competition, no implication of a hierarchy of abilities or gifts. Every excellence, every achievement, enhances the general wealth of possibility for yet more excellence.

And it is interesting to note that for Tocqueville there is no simple notion of utility. This awakening of minds and spirits is a sunlight that falls across the whole landscape of civilization. The questions being put to us now—What good are the humanities? Why are they at the center of our education?—might, for all history can tell us, be answered decisively by this vision of the effects of learning, which took hold and flourished as the study of ancient poetry, philosophy and language, Scripture and theology, and of history itself, by means of the printing press and the rise of vernacular languages, long before science and technology even began to come abreast of them.

Is Tocqueville describing something real? He stood at a place in the evolution of culture where there would be both a continuously new, because incremental, expansion of literacy and learning, and a vast population they had not yet touched. John Keats, briefly Tocqueville’s contemporary, was moved by an Elizabethan translation of Homer: “Then felt I like some watcher of the skies/When a new planet swims into his ken.” What was it that

Keats took from this encounter? What “wild surmise”? Keats holds such a rarefied place in literature now that it is hard to believe he was once ridiculed as one of “the Cockney School of Poetry.” But his sonnet is expressing that old humanist privilege, of being “ravished” by a book, and of finding that it has a suggestive power far beyond its subject, a potency the affected mind itself might take years to realize. I talked once with a cab driver who had spent years in prison. He said he had no idea that the world was something he could be interested in. And then he read a book.

In the history of the West, for all its achievements, there is also a persisting impatience with the energy and originality of the mind. It can make us very poor servants of purposes that are not our own. A Benthamite panopticon would have radically reduced the varieties of experience that help to individuate us, in theory producing happiness in factory workers by preventing their having even a glimpse of the fact that there could be more to life. Censorship, lists of prohibited books, restrictions on travel, and limits on rights of assembly all accomplish by more practicable means some part of the same exclusions, precluding the stimulus of new thought, new things to wonder about. The contemporary assault on the humanities has something of the same objective and would employ similar methods. Workers, a category that seems to subsume us all except the idlest rich, should learn what they need to learn to be competitive in the new economy. All the rest is waste and distraction.

Competitive with whom? On what terms? To what end? With anyone whose vigor and good fortune allows her to prosper, apparently. With anyone who has done a clever thing we did not think of first. And will these competitors of ours be left to enjoy the miserable advantage of low wages and compromised health? And is there any particular reason to debase human life in order to produce more, faster, without reference to the worth of the product, or to the value of the things sacrificed to its manufacture? Wouldn't most people, given an hour or two to reflect, consider this an intolerably trivial use to be put to, for them and their children? Life is brief and fragile, after all. Then what is this new economy whose demands we must always be ready to fill? We may assume it will be driven by innovation, and by what are called market forces, which can be fads or speculation or chicanery. Oh, yes, rowdy old capitalism. Let it ply its music.



John Keats; drawing by David Levine

Then again, in the all-consuming form proposed for it now, it is a little like those wars I mentioned earlier. It is equally inimical to poetry, eloquence, memory, the beauty of wit, the fires of imagination, the depth of thought. It is equally disinclined to reward gifts that cannot be turned to its uses. The urgency of war or crisis has been brought to bear on our civil

institutions, which is to say, on the reserves and resources of civility we have created over many generations.

One of our recent presidential candidates called for an attack on the “cartel...of universities,” by which he means our system of public higher education. The phrase is startling, considering that these institutions are in effect great city-states, shaped by their regions and histories, largely supported by their alumni, variously specialized around faculties that are attracted by distinctive areas of excellence. Recently, despite their enormous contributions to science and technology, they have been losing the support of many state legislatures, first on the pretext of austerity, and then on the grounds that they were properly understood as burdens on the public, rather than as public assets. As state financing fell, tuitions rose, involving many students in burdensome debt. For generations people had, in effect, prepaid their children’s and grandchildren’s tuition and underwritten the quality of their education by paying taxes. Suddenly the legislatures decided to put the money to other uses, or to cut taxes, and families were obliged to absorb much higher costs. For this, blame has fallen on the universities. And since the new cost of university is weighed against potential earnings, students and families being so burdened, the humanities are under great pressure to justify their existence. As it happens, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has a fine music school, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute gives its students prizes for fiction and poetry. These schools might know something about nurturing the technical mind.

But there is an impulse behind the recent assaults on great institutions that is historically expressed as social engineering. The ideal worker will not have a head full of poetry, say the neo-Benthamites. It is assumed, of course, that he or she will be potentially omniscient in service to the ever-changing needs and demands of the new economy—highly trained, that is, to acquire some undescribed skill set that will be proof against obsolescence. We await particulars. But the object is clear—to create a virtual army out of the general population who will compete successfully against whomever for whatever into an endless future, at profound cost to themselves. All this differs from military engagement in one great particular. The generals are always assumed to be free to abandon their armies and go over to the other side, if there is profit in it.

The United States is in many ways a grand experiment. Let us take Iowa as an example. What would early nineteenth-century settlers on the open prairie do first? Well, one of the first things they did was found a university, which is now 170 years old. Agriculture became, as it remains, the basis of the state economy. How did the university develop in response to this small, agrarian population? It became, as it remains, a thriving and innovative center for the arts—theater, music, painting, and, of course, creative writing. The medical school and the professional schools are fine, as well. The sciences are very strong. But the arts are the signature of the place and have been for generations. Let us say that these old Iowans did not invest their resources and their youth as wisely as they might have. Or let us say that, the world lying open to them, they had the profound satisfaction of doing what they wanted to do,

at cost to themselves in the opinion of mercenaries, with immeasurable returns in the opinion of humanists. Their university has been a great nurturer of American letters. If Tocqueville was right, it has nurtured a great deal more besides.

What are we doing here, we professors of English? Our project is often dismissed as elitist. That word has a new and novel sting in American politics. This is odd, in a period uncharacteristically dominated by political dynasties. Apparently the slur doesn't stick to those who show no sign of education or sophistication, no matter what their pedigree. Be that as it may. There is a fundamental slovenliness in much public discourse that can graft heterogeneous things together around a single word. There is justified alarm about the bizarre concentrations of wealth that have occurred globally, and the tiny fraction of the wealthiest one percent who have wildly disproportionate influence over the lives of the rest of us. They are called the elite, and so are those of us who encourage the kind of thinking that probably does make certain of the young less than ideal recruits to their armies of the employed.

If there is a point where the two meanings overlap, it would be in the fact that the teaching we do is what in America we have always called liberal education, education appropriate to free people, very much including those old Iowans who left the university to return to the hamlet or the farm. Now, in a country richer than any they could have imagined, we are endlessly told we must cede that humane freedom to a very uncertain promise of employability. It seems most unlikely that any oligarch foresees this choice as being forced on his or her own children. I note here that these criticisms and pressures are not brought to bear on our private universities, though most or all of them receive government money. Elitism in its classic sense is not being attacked but asserted and defended.

If I seem to have conceded an important point in saying that the humanities do not prepare ideal helots, economically speaking, I do not at all mean to imply that they are less than ideal for preparing capable citizens, imaginative and innovative contributors to a full and generous, and largely unmonetizable, national life. America has known long enough how to be a prosperous country, for all its deviations from the narrow path of economic rationalism. Empirically speaking, these errancies are highly compatible with our flourishing economically, if they are not a cause of it, which is more than we can know. The politicians who attack public higher education as too expensive have made it so for electoral or ideological reasons and could undo the harm with the stroke of a pen. They have created the crisis to which they hope to bring their draconian solutions.

Neo-Benthamism stands or falls with our unquestioning subservience to the notion of competition, which really comes down to our dealing with the constant threat on the part of these generals to abandon their armies, and, of course, with their demonstrated willingness to act on the threat. Does anyone who cares for such things owe them those great and ancient pleasures of life—poetry, eloquence, memory, the fires of imagination, the depth of thought? Do the pressures to compete with China or Russia deprive us and the world of gifts the Chinese or the Russians would bring to it? We know these cultures have been rich and

brilliant in ways that are no longer visible to us, at least. If we do have this effect, is there one thing good about it, for us or for them? If the vastness of the Russian imagination, the elegance of the Chinese eye and hand, were present to us to admire without invidious comparison, of them to us, or us to them, wouldn't the world be richer for us all?

If the rise of humanism was a sunrise, then in this present time we are seeing an eclipse. I take it to be a merely transient gloom, because the work of those old scholars and translators and printers, the poets and philosophers they recovered and the poets and philosophers who came after them, the habit of literacy and the profound interest in the actual world and the present time, have all taken hold, more profoundly than we know. We have not lost them. We have only forgotten what they mean. We have forgotten to understand them for what they are, a spectacular demonstration of the capacities of the human mind, always renewed in our own experience, igniting possibilities no one could have foreseen. Tocqueville may be no more than conventional in speaking of them as "gifts which heaven shares out by chance."

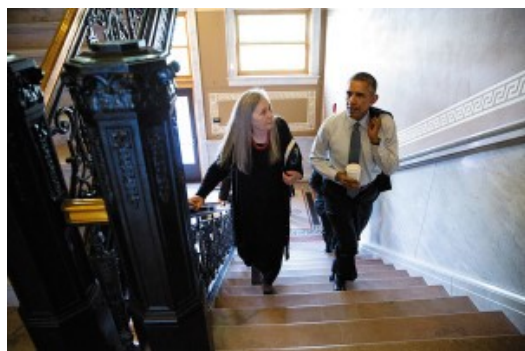
And it may be that the convention of ascribing our gifts to a divine source, a convention that comes down from the earliest humanists, gave him and them a language able to capture something our truncated philosophies cannot accommodate. I never hear the phrase "human grandeur," though many a planet has swum into my ken, though I know the rings of Saturn in detail. Step back and consider that, more or less hidden from sight, uniquely on this tiny planet there was a cache of old books and scrolls, testimonies to human thought that, when opened, opened the universe to us—six hundred years on, of course, which is not a heartbeat in cosmic time. An amazing tale, certainly. We deal in disparagement, and feel it proves we are freer of illusion than earlier generations were. Tocqueville had seen the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, but what of that?

We are, as we have always been, dangerous creatures, the enemies of our own happiness. But the only help we have ever found for this, the only melioration, is in mutual reverence. God's grace comes to us unmerited, the theologians say. But the grace we could extend to one another we consider it best to withhold in very many cases, presumptively, or in the absence of what we consider true or sufficient merit (we being more particular than God), or because few gracious acts, if they really deserve the name, would stand up to a cost-benefit analysis. This is not the consequence of a new atheism, or a systemic materialism that afflicts our age more than others. It is good old human meanness, which finds its terms and pretexts in every age. The best argument against human grandeur is the meagerness of our response to it, paradoxically enough.

Then how to recover the animating spirit of humanism? For one thing, it would help if we reclaimed, or simply borrowed, conceptual language that would allow us to acknowledge that some things are so brilliant they can only be understood as virtuosic acts of mind, thought in the pure enjoyment of itself, whether in making a poem or a scientific discovery, or just learning something it feels unaccountably good to know. There is an unworldliness in the experience, and in what it yields, that requires a larger understanding than our terse

vocabularies of behavior and reward can capture. I have had students tell me that they had never heard the word “beautiful” applied to a piece of prose until they came to us at the workshop. Literature had been made a kind of data to illustrate, supposedly, some graceless theory that stood apart from it, and that would be shed in a year or two and replaced by something post- or neo- and in any case as gracelessly irrelevant to a work of language as whatever it displaced. I think this phenomenon is an effect of the utilitarian hostility to the humanities and to art, an attempt to repackage them, to give them some appearance of respectability. And yet, the beautiful persists, and so do eloquence and depth of thought, and they belong to all of us because they are the most pregnant evidence we can have of what is possible in us.

RELATED



President Obama & Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa

President Barack Obama and Marilynne Robinson



President Obama & Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation—II

President Barack Obama and Marilynne Robinson



Fear

Marilynne Robinson