

Oh, the Humanities!



by Theodore Dalrymple

A friend of mine kindly sent me the brochure of a conference of art historians that has just been held at University College, London, which claims to be one of the best academic departments of art history in the world.

This claim naturally put me in mind of a line from a poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins: No worst, there is none.

I now quote from the summary of a keynote speaker to this conference; merely the first that I came across, not chosen because it is the worst.

What does it mean to speak in this space “for art history”?

Speaking “to” not “about,” speaking “with” (in disparate company, scattered yet gathering, outside in)... Walking with the words of Trinh Minh-ha and Maria Lugones in my hands and ears, “against and away from that hushing of the manyness of the past in the present,” I assemble some off-key notes...to sound out some of the voicings and ventriloquisms echoing in my praxis of the last 30 years, to locate myself momentarily and uncomfortably “here.” Invoking words, gestures and interruptions that might be partially read, seen and heard (or not at all), I want to revisit and affirm these as small, tactical acts of disturbance and resistance, decolonial and otherwise. A farcical calling card (1995–ongoing), a disobliging “artist’s statement,” my ghosts of AAH conferences past (1998, 2008, 2018), and the multiplicity of voices coming into play in between and since–improvised choruses and ad hoc witnesses to mundane and fabulous displacements, to live archivery, aspiring and refusing.

This does not quite rise to the level of schizophrenic verbigeration—the repetition of nonsensical phrases or fragments of phrases seen in severe cases—but it is very near it.

I do not mean to be disparaging. It takes great skill to use language in this fashion. I suggest that, if you don’t believe me, you try to do likewise. I have tried but not succeeded: Whatever I say, meaning keeps breaking through. Evidently, I am too attached to language as an instrument for the conveyance of thought to succeed as an academic art historian in the Western world.

A question that has long puzzled me is whether the thoughts of a person who produces this kind of verbigeration actually correspond to what he or she says or writes. In the fastnesses of their skull, do they actually think like this? On the train home, for example? If so, how terrible it must be to be him or her! How boring! How utterly dispiriting!

Art history is not the only field in which people have turned themselves into verbiage-generating machines; far from it. The person who produced the above example could easily change careers and become a manager in Britain's National Health Service, having so triumphantly mastered the art of high-flown meaningless combined with vague but false connotations of innovatory thought. Indeed, in the modern Anglophone world, any ambitious mediocrity can rise far in any hierarchy simply by mastering this language—although, as I have intimated, this is not at all easy to do. The main requirement for success in achieving such mastery is determination; then, with a little ruthlessness and willingness to stab people in the back, the sky is the limit as far as a career is concerned.

University College, London, is funded mainly by public grants and student fees, and I regard the promotion of the polysyllabic drivel that I have quoted above as a form of legalized theft, both from the public purse and from the pockets of private persons; though I repeat, to make it clear to libel lawyers, that it is theft morally speaking, not juridically.

Its purpose (in this context) is to advance the careers of those who want the status of scholar without the dreary necessity of actual scholarship. The endless recombination of a few phrases hinting at a small repertoire of half-formed thoughts, with a lacing of neologism, is all that is required. And if a person is sufficiently ambitious, and mediocre, he or she never grows tired of or bored with this particular goose that lays the golden eggs.

If we ever recover from this academic sickness, which at the moment looks rather doubtful (for as the American senator said, you can't get a hog to slaughter itself), we will wonder how, when, and why the sickness started. I don't have a definitive answer; no doubt the process was insidious and crept on us unawares, more like old age than a declaration of war. Tracing disasters to their origins can in a few steps

take us back, not very usefully, to the Garden of Eden and the idea of original sin; nothing, after all, has ever been right since the fruit of the tree of knowledge was first bitten into by our ancestors. But we must bear in mind that what explains everything explains nothing.

If I had to plump for a single cause, then, it would be the expansion of tertiary education, especially in the humanities. "More means worse" was the cry of reactionaries who were against this expansion, and they have been proved right. This may not be so in the exact sciences, where it is easier to maintain standards, but genuine humanistic scholarship is inherently and rightfully intense and of small scale. The attempt to make it a mass phenomenon was bound to dilute its quality, and so it has done. Homeopathic doses of real learning now seem to go a long way in academic careers.

The production of graduates of the humanities in large numbers was dangerous. One of its principal effects was to greatly increase the prevalence and scope of pretentiousness. What word better conveys the quality of the keynote speaker's summary than *pretentious*?

Pretentious teachers teach pretension to new generations, who must then be found occupation to flatter their pretensions. Thus, the process is self-reinforcing and self-reproducing like a colony of bacteria in a petri dish. The only thing that will halt the expansion is the irruption of reality, for among other things, the pretension is always reality-denying. Let us hope that the irruption of reality will not be violent.

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