

## Rebuilding the Humanities

TO THE EDITOR:

I would like to thank Robert Scholes for his enlightening and courageous engagement with the state of the discipline in his 2004 Presidential Address, “The Humanities in a Posthumanist World” (120 [2005]: 724–33). Scholes’s careful evaluation of the important role that the humanities, including writing and rhetoric, offer the modern student is to be commended. The humanities “may not be able to make ourselves or those around us better human beings,” as Scholes points out, but they are capable of making us better than we were and as good as we may be given the political and economic circumstances in which we find ourselves. As much as I sincerely appreciate Scholes’s intellectual commitment to the “heart and mind” (733), I must, however, take strong exception to his characterization and seeming critique of philosophical pragmatism as it applies to the current debate on the humanities, and especially I must challenge the false dialectic that he creates between fundamentalism and pragmatism, as if these were competing theories, as if the entire body of humanistic study was not by its nature antifundamentalist.

As someone who studies American pragmatism and its relation to language, literature, and education, I am always struck by the way that writers variously choose to use the words *pragmatic*, *pragmatist*, and *pragmatism*. In its most general and colloquial use, *pragmatic* refers to a concern for the causal effects of any given action, without regard to fundamental ideals or fixed theories. Pragmatism does not, as Scholes’s address implies, mean merely intellectual relativism, and it certainly does not imply any sort of bad faith or deception on the part of the pragmatic agent, as it is so generally used in common parlance. Pragmatists do not simply throw up their hands and say that there is no meaning in the world. Far from it; pragmatism holds that meaning and belief are central elements of even our supposedly most objective functions and that, rather than merely assert that “anyone can indeed say anything” (730)—truly a spurious characterization of pragmatism—we must recognize the effects, large and small, that our beliefs make manifest in the world. Pragmatism is inherently a critical endeavor. Fundamentalism, on the other hand, is

dogmatic, grounded in a particular historical context, and lacks all critical faculty, relying instead on a fixed set of unchanging principles that are beyond interpretation and that inevitably lead to social and technological paralysis.

If we were to contrast fundamentalism and pragmatism fairly—rather than submit them to Scholes’s false dialectic, as if some sort of mythical and convenient middle ground were the answer to all our problems—we would see that pragmatism relies on a set of principles and beliefs that are constantly subject to critique and change but that are held with no less passion, conviction, and appreciation than those that Scholes recommends we should embrace as teachers and scholars in the modern languages. Indeed, Scholes’s suggestion that pragmatism was at the forefront of opposition to deconstruction is strange, seeing that the two methods have so much in common. The main difference, one that Scholes doesn’t mention, between pragmatism and deconstruction and between pragmatism and the general critical methodology of most literary work in the last twenty years is the degree to which it values action over critique, and this is, after all, at the heart of the debate about the value of the humanities in an academe dominated by the sciences. In the sciences, which for good reason we humanists so deeply envy, students and scientists actively look for solutions to problems, seeking out what works and discarding what does not. Students, as we know, learn from positive examples, and when we in the humanities ceaselessly emphasize the negative, the “merely” critical rather than the “usefully” critical, instead of focusing on the positive aspects of our discipline, instead of continually pressing the boundaries of the possible, we are in danger of devolving into a kind of self-indulgent and narcissistic self-reflection that loses sight of our audience, including the students sitting before us in our classrooms who are wondering why they’re there. This kind of hand-wringing and self-doubt, and not pragmatism, is the greatest danger that faces the humanities.

That said, it seems that Scholes is perhaps more of a pragmatist than he may realize. After all, arguing that we must reaffirm the “uses” of our work (William James, as we know, famously spoke about the “cash value” of our ideas) and, even more tellingly, that we must not use the “methods of our

opponents” (something Richard Rorty has made clear in his defense of neopragmatism, arguing that we must change the terms of the argument) is a pragmatist form of engagement and good advice for how to deal with our predicament.

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#### TO THE EDITOR:

Robert Scholes’s elegant and resourceful Presidential Address, “The Humanities in a Post-humanist World,” provided a hardheaded picture of the difficult times faced by the humanities. But its remedial conclusion, “going back” to the “roots” of language studies (732), fell sadly short of the one thing needful: science. Summarizing George Steiner’s despairing essay in *Salmagundi*, with its painful contrast of the soft humanities with the hard sciences, Scholes quotes Steiner’s remark that, unlike the sciences, in the humanities “[a]nyone can say anything” (qtd. on 725). But instead of benefiting from Steiner’s explosive message, Scholes just moves on.

Reading Scholes’s address, one would hardly know that the intellectual universe has been turned upside down over the past twenty-five years by Darwinian evolution’s “modern synthesis” and the latest developments in the cognitive neurosciences. Like the head-buried proponents of intelligent design, academics in the humanities don’t want to know that literary texts, far from being autotelic or merely a part of cultural history, are—like everything else produced by organisms—the products of biological history, which means the history of the body and its materially constituted brain. This brain is not a free-floating, self-determining, autonomous spook, with “roots” in language and the “trivium” (732), but a gradually evolved custodian of the body that abetted the struggle for survival—and the production of offspring—against competing forces.

Indeed, language itself is a recently acquired capacity. Had human beings evolved somewhat differently, had genetic and environmental factors been slightly other than they were, had human beings been endowed with only three fingers instead of five, with differently formed vocal equipment, with batlike echolocation, with canine olfactory

sensitivity, with different electrochemical transmissions and greater or lesser sensitivity of the neurons, with the visual acuity of hawks or a different heart rate, a different metabolism, a different configuration of the brain—had any of these alternative paths been taken (or a million others), language and all our arts would be radically different from what they are today. The composition of our blood, our involuntary emotions, our limited ability to focus on more than a small handful of things at once, our need for certain nutrients, the right air quality, a nurturing caregiver—all these factors (and a million others) lie behind the meters and sonics of poetry, the subject matters of novels, the layout and sense qualities of paintings, the scale of architecture, the compositional balances of photography, the failure of twelve-tone music. And most crucial of all, these factors lie behind the universal characteristics of human beings of all cultures (as Donald Brown has amply demonstrated in *Human Universals*), however diverse their expression. The study of literature without an ever-conscious awareness of its biological contingencies is akin to the fantasizings of creationism.

Humanists who presume to deal with the arts—or the world—in the twenty-first century, not simply repeating exhausted truisms from years of tedious inbreeding, should be facing up to E. O. Wilson, Steven Pinker, Daniel Dennett, Joseph Carroll, Ellen Dissanayake, Richard Dawkins, Gerald Edelman, Jared Diamond, and similar thinkers, who rarely can afford merely to “say anything.” It will take a lot more than a return to the same old roots to yank the humanities out of their dogmatic slumbers in time to rescue the sinking ship. When what we need to understand is how the machinery works, how it relates to our evolved nature, and what the arts and humanities have to do with it all, raising the ship’s tattered pennant a foot higher won’t do the trick.

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#### *Reply:*

I thank James D. Hoff and Harold Fromm for their thoughtful responses to my talk, to which I will respond below.