

Content and Its Discontents: Undergraduate Literary Study Today

Domna Stanton

For as long as I have been a part of the MLA—many, many a season—literary studies, more broadly the humanities, have been “in crisis,” a platitude that also implies that this state will end at some point. However, like Freud’s civilization, discontents in literary study have not been confined to winter but have absorbed all seasons. We know now that we are confronting some basic changes in the academy and in our fields, along with phenomena that will turn out to be transient; but permanent or transient, we need strategies for confronting them. Today, I want to mention some of these changes and then to insist, after Wilde’s dictum in *A Woman of No Importance*, that “discontent is the first step in the progress” (173)—of a major, a department, a discipline—even though I recognize that “progress” smacks of liberal Enlightenment myths. Still, I am willing to wager that productive changes will result from the concrete and conceptual steps that we must take.

Higher education has adopted the mantra of preprofessionalism and, by disturbing extension, of a business model for evaluating a liberal arts education. As Suzanne Guerlac observed at a recent workshop at Columbia University on French studies, faculty members are increasingly viewed as content specialists whose courses should be designed by software engineers and should become the intellectual property of the academic institution. The business model’s ideal of efficiency, assessed by outcomes, makes the academy willing to sacrifice knowledge gained over years of work, even to eliminate tenure, for the perceived short-term financial benefits of adjunct labor. More visible in public universities than private ones, this business model (and ideal) has been eagerly adopted by conservative governors in Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and, most notably, in Wisconsin, where Scott Walker recently changed the century-old mission of the university from “the search for truth” and the improvement “of the human condition” to the imperative of “meet[ing] the state’s workforce needs” (Strauss). In a related vein, the former NEH chairman William Bennett, who has enjoyed a lucrative career in the governmental, private, and not-for-profit sectors with his PhD in philosophy, asked North Carolina’s Governor McCrory on his radio show to consider, “How many PhDs in philosophy do I need to subsidize?” Even President Obama remarked in a January 2014 speech, “I promise you,

folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree,” though he at least apologized for his “glib” comment (qtd. in Zakaria 19). However politically driven, such views tap into the justified anxieties of middle-class and working-class families about the costs of a four-year liberal arts education—which ranged in 2014 in New York City from \$24,356 at the City University of New York to \$196,552 at Columbia University—and about the employment prospects of graduates saddled with debt, a group that included Barack and Michelle Obama not long ago.

The targeting of the humanities for the lack of employment returns on considerable investment may have exacerbated the decline of enrollments and majors across the humanities, a decline documented in *The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future*. However, as Michael Bérubé has emphasized, this report’s graph does not support such a conclusion; instead, enrollments in the humanities rose from 14% in 1966 to 18% in 1970, then fell precipitously, recovered somewhat in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and have remained the same since, hovering between 7% and 10%. If the baseline is set further back, concludes Anthony Grafton and James Grossman’s “The Humanities in Dubious Battle,” enrollments peaked in the 1960s, were at much lower levels in the 1940s and 1950s, and returned to those levels around 1990, where they have stayed ever since—a large-scale fluctuation with a bubble in the middle, not a story of decline—a misreading of the data that has become truth through repetition.¹

This narrative of decline has been cast, by pundits such as David Brooks, as the fault of the humanists themselves, who he claims “have lost faith in their own enterprise.” In the heady theory days, humanists were faulted for retreating into an elitist island of rarefied (but somehow also politically correct) topics and incomprehensible jargon. It should be noted that the criticism of excessive use of technical idioms is never leveled at scientists. (I remember a tenure-and-promotion committee meeting at the University of Michigan in which a scientist defended a dossier the rest of us could not comprehend by stating that only three people in the world could grasp the candidate’s work.)

In the humanistic fields that concern us, study in English and in languages other than English (LOTE), the latest MLA enrollment survey does not confirm a pervasive reduction. Language enrollments in United States colleges and universities have declined, and for the first time this decrease includes Spanish, although advanced language study increased in American

Sign Language, Arabic, Chinese, Ancient Greek, Biblical and Modern Hebrew, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish for the period 2009–13 (Goldberg, Looney, and Lusin 40–41). (I wonder whether French will experience a similar increase now that it has been placed on the Department of Defense’s, Department of Justice’s, and Department of Health and Human Services’s lists of languages and cultures that are now considered critical to our national security, which should serve to reverse cuts in Title IX funding for French [“Consultation”].) As for majors, a 2015 MLA study notes that the number of first majors in French, German, Italian, and Spanish has decreased, but the more important figure for LOTE in general and for French in particular is second majors, which I prefer to call double majors and which are steadily rising in relation to single majors. This 2015 survey concludes that double majors in LOTE rose from 28.0% of the number of single majors in 2001 to 38.6% in 2013 and that this percentage exceeded that of double majors in the next most populous field (which was psychology) by 25.2%. For French, it means that whereas there were 2,377 single majors in 2001, and 2,284 in 2013, a reduction of 94, the number of double majors rose from 869 to 1,249 in that period, bringing the total number of French majors to 3,533 (MLA Office of Research). When did French last enjoy that number of majors?

This trend, which I believe will persist into the foreseeable future, provides another reason for continuing to rethink the major in French and for finding ways to make it more appealing, pertinent, and accommodating,² while also challenging students intellectually. I want to confront some issues of the single or double major in French, which I hope will resonate with other MLA fields.

I begin with the basic, but much debated, issue of what we call our department—French Language and Literature or French and Francophone Studies, to take the most frequently used titles today.³ The old divide between language and literature has been detrimental to our values and practices, in my view, because language is thereby cast as a *techne* divorced from culture. Such a divorce contradicts our productive practice of introducing cultural and literary texts even in the first year of study. This old divide has effectively upheld a two-tiered departmental system, in which the tenured enjoy high prestige and lecturers in language very little. More broadly, the language-literature binary belies the multidisciplinary fields we integrate into our readings of literary texts, including history, psychoanalysis, law, and medicine. As Antoine Compagnon noted at the above-mentioned Columbia University workshop, literature has

constituted but a fraction of what was taught in United States French departments, notably philology and history.

Rather than *language and literature*, I would argue for *French studies* as a title that is more appealing to double majors, who bring the methods and insights of other disciplines to French, and that more accurately reflects the numerous texts of cultural studies we teach. Moreover, given the complex historicity and elasticity of literature, as a term and concept, how do we even know at what point and for what reasons a text becomes literary or not? But, to go further, I would privilege *francophone studies* over *French studies*. For too long, French has been to francophone as center is to periphery, an imperial construct that denies the reality that French is spoken in much greater numbers outside *l'Hexagone* than inside it—in Africa, the Indian Ocean and Asia, the Caribbean and North America. Francophone studies, like French language and literature, would signal that, as a recent anthology put it, French is global (McDonald and Suleiman), a heterodox language that includes Creole and pidgins, not to mention idioms inflected by African languages such as Wolof and Lingala.⁴ What difference does the name of a department make? I believe that the name affects emphases in the curriculum and pedagogy, what we understand to be theory, and of course our hiring priorities.

A major in francophone studies cannot in practice (actually, has never been able to) realize the mythical ideal of complete coverage. Some departments may wish to maintain traditional century courses. But rather than a list of great books, why not turn the nineteenth-century course into an interdisciplinary study of money and the novel; a seminar on the Middle Ages into an investigation of encounters with others; and a seventeenth-century course, given a title such as *The Voyage Out*, into a reading of orientalist theater (in Corneille and Racine) and science fiction novels (of Cyrano de Bergerac and Gabriel de Foigny), of texts on geography and mapmaking, of narratives by captains of slave ships, of accounts by Jesuits on conversions, and of descriptions of exotic fauna and flora in Persia, China, and the Caribbean colonies? The primary intellectual goals of major courses are to expose students to multiple ways of reading closely and analytically, to promote the writing of interpretative or research papers that develop a thesis, deploy evidence to sustain the argument and reach conclusions—skills far more important than gaining coverage. These skills are transferable to all other college courses students will take, ultimately to careers in the nonacademic world.

So saying, I suggest that we stop fetishizing perfect oral and written French, stop making

it rather than interdisciplinary intellectual inquiry a principal goal of our undergraduate major in LOTE. To be sure, some students will value mastery of the language, especially the few who go on to graduate school and who should develop a feeling for style, which is lost in translation. But *Francophone studies* should mean that courses in English count toward the major, in whatever number out of the usual ten courses a particular faculty or department agrees on. The interdisciplinary focus of francophone studies should welcome students from the social and other sciences who may not have the level of French to read Mme de La Fayette. We have no right to feel outraged, as many of us do, when English professors teach *Madame Bovary*, if we, whose field is French and who have acquired intensive knowledge of the period, the genre, and the author's work, refuse to claim the space of teaching in translation for ourselves. To teach some courses in English is also a sure way of overcoming the proverbial insularity of foreign language departments. To exclude English from francophone studies is to be cut off from other disciplines and intellectual currents and from possible college- and university-wide collaborations. As Guerlac puts it, "a bilingual practice would open up intellectual and pedagogical possibilities . . . that [are] essential to keeping [francophone] studies alive."

Interdisciplinary collaborations with other humanistic disciplines already are a feature of literary and cultural offerings in French departments—collaborations with the fields of visual studies, philosophy, history, and cultural anthropology; with programs that combine the humanities and social sciences, such as women's gender and sexuality studies; with African, ethnic, and colonial-postcolonial studies; and with the emerging interdisciplinary focus on human rights from the Enlightenment to postmodernity. With the social sciences in particular, we can have productive collaborations in the economics of inequality, in political science and theory, in sociology, in area studies and international relations, and in the new geography and environmental studies. The possibilities are enormous; we need to have the imagination and the will to create these linkages and to expand the purview of French and any other LOTE.

I do not regard STEM, fields single-mindedly promoted in education policy today, as the humanities' nemesis. Close observation and deduction from evidence are great strengths of our own modes of inquiry. Conversely, our skills can be critical to the training of scientists. A friend of mine teaches poetry to psychiatry interns at Weill Cornell in New York, because doctors there want students to deepen their capacity to pick up meaningful clues from patients' oral narratives. More broadly, I endorse Lawrence Summers's and Shirley Tilghman's views that scientific

literacy must be a feature of undergraduate education (Zakaria 66–67); we in French can contribute to this goal by offering courses on the French notion and history of science, say, from Descartes to Curie to Monod. Moreover, we should become proactively involved in the shift from STEM to STEAM—the A represents both art and design⁵—spearheaded by the Rhode Island School of Design, which aims to place art and design at the center of STEM, encourage their integration into K–20 education, and influence employers to hire artists and designers who can drive innovation. An important effort for the MLA would be to reach beyond STEAM to encompass language, literature, and culture—STEAM:LLC?—and to mobilize other humanities organizations, including the Mellon Foundation and the NEH, to collaborate on this project.⁶

Such a capacious view of the connections between C. P. Snow’s “two cultures” underlies the curriculum of the new College of Liberal Arts and Sciences created in 2011 by Yale University and the National University of Singapore (NUS), which enrolled its first class in 2013. This curriculum exposes students to scientific method and inquiry (rather than facts)—to learning, for example, how experimental scientists conduct research and how statistics inform social policy. The institution promotes a core multicultural curriculum, in one course comparing ethics in Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, and Buddha; in another the primitivisms of Gauguin and Picasso, woodcarvings from South Sea Islands and the *ukiyo-e* tradition of Japanese woodblock prints (Zakaria 67–71). The college also has a required work component outside the classroom, which might translate into a community-service requirement in our majors. The Yale-NUS model, which privileges both scientific inquiry and multicultural pluridisciplinarity, is an idea that can inspire us in our humanistic part of the academy as well.

Beyond the social and natural sciences, I would urge us to forge interdisciplinary links with other schools on campus. We can create academic ties between, say, pharmacy and French or between Spanish and nursing, as some colleges and universities have done. Study-abroad programs, located in francophone countries, can effectively appeal to students in business, medicine, and the law, who will then become students in our department on their return. At a recent MLA convention, I organized a session with the former MLA presidents Cathy Porter and Sylvia Molloy called “Beyond the Departmental Walls,” in which invited MLA members described how they have created not only interdepartmental and interschool ties but also links to the community: campus-community partnerships and collaborations with community colleges and with K–12 schools. Such efforts can enlarge the current and future pool of students in single

and double majors. Our failure to speak out on behalf of the humanities, to overcome the insularity of LOTE, is a long-standing problem, but now it is a critical issue if we are to ensure the continued presence of our undergraduate majors on campus and promote their growth.

As many articles in the press emphasize, the ability to focus on a text or problem with others in intense analytic collaboration is the model for collaboration in the professional world of the future. We do this work in our classes; we need to tell the world beyond the department's walls that we have always done it and done it well. Businesses and corporations recognize that they must employ people who are sensitive to the differences of others—an ethical skill that, as both Martha Nussbaum and Anthony Appiah (*Cosmopolitanism* and *Ethics*) remind us, literature teaches exceptionally well.⁷ Since 2005, a growing number of voices have claimed that we have already moved beyond the knowledge economy, which the Internet and other technologies provided, to a creativity economy that taps the imagination to produce innovation. To be sure, this declaration may be the latest salvo for outcompeting China; and it may well be a gimmick to connect with consumers in a more compelling way (to focus on the driver, not the car, as one titan put it [Zakaria 93–94]). But important hires are confirming this new emphasis,⁸ and we humanists know how to create learning environments that value creativity and innovation.⁹ We can cultivate our garden to make it richer and more capacious, but in this spring of our discontents, like *Candide*, we must also take our essential fruits to market and, yes, sell them to the world.

Notes

The comments of Antoine Compagnon made at the workshop The Future of French and Francophone Studies, held at Columbia University on 12 September 2014, are summarized here with the author's permission. The comments of Suzanne Guerlac, made at the same workshop, are cited here with the author's permission.

¹. On the decline of the humanities, see *The Heart of the Matter*, a report on the state of the humanities and the social sciences congressionally ordered and issued by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and consistently quoted (Commission).

². During a French department review that I recently chaired at a research college, science and French double majors complained that the advanced courses in French conflicted

with science labs. In this residential college and in urban institutions as well, such advanced courses could be offered in the evenings to accommodate the science students' schedules.

3. This issue persists where more than one language and culture is involved, as in Department of Modern Languages or Department of Romance Studies.

4. The International Organization of La Francophonie estimates that the number of people who speak French as their first or second language increased to 274 million in 2014 (qtd. in "French Language"). By some predictions, the francophone population is going to double or even triple over the next generation (e.g., the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development predicts that the francophone population will reach 700 million by 2050 ["Status"]). This means that employers will want students who are literate, for example, in African francophone cultures. Africa should also be the focus of student interest in world culture and literature, environmental rehabilitation, refugee studies, conflict resolution, public health, development, and human rights.

5. See the Web site *STEM to STEAM* (<http://stemtosteam.org/>) for a list of the educational institutions that have adopted this program.

6. Despite the T in STEM, I have not mentioned the digital humanities, because I have not as yet determined how I can use the digital productively in my research and writing. I am ready to be convinced by those who have; I am simply agnostic at this point.

7. Recent articles point out that humanists do well on the professional job market, "just later" (Adams). *How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment*, a joint project of the Association for American Colleges and Universities and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, shows that while graduates in the liberal arts do not earn as much as professional and preprofessional majors (e.g., nurses and business majors) when first out of school, by the time they are between fifty-six and sixty, considered their peak earning years, they make an average of \$66,000, or \$2,000 more a year than those with professional degrees (Humphreys and Kelly).

8. Beth Comstock assumed the newly created position of chief marketing officer in charge of generating innovation and creativity at General Electric; David Kelley, cofounder of IDEO, became head of the new Institute of Design at Stanford University.

9. As Bruce Nussbaum writes, "Increasingly, the new core competence is creativity. . . . It isn't just about math and science anymore. It's about creativity, imagination, and above all,

innovation.”

Works Cited

Adams, Susan. “Majoring in the Humanities Does Pay Off, Just Later.” *Forbes*. Forbes, 22 Jan. 2014. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

<<http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2014/01/22/majoring-in-the-humanities-does-pay-off-just-later/>>.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.

———. *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.

Bérubé, Michael. “The Humanities Declining? Not according to the Numbers.” *The Chronicle Review*. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Chronicle of Higher Educ., 1 Jul. 2013.

Web. 21 May 2015. <<http://chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-Declining-Not/140093/>>.

Brooks, David. “The Humanist Vocation.” *The Opinion Pages*. *The New York Times*. New York Times, 20 Jun 2013. Web. 17 Apr. 2015.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/opinion/brooks-the-humanist-vocation.html>>.

Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences. *The Heart of the Matter*. *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Amer. Acad. of Arts and Sciences, 2013. Web. 21 May

2015. <http://www.humanitiescommission.org/_pdf/hss_report.pdf>.

“Consultation with Federal Agencies on Areas of National Need.” *U.S. Department of Education*. Dept. of Educ., 14 May 2014. Web. 13 Oct. 2015.

<<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/iegps/languageneeds.html>>.

“French Language Is on the Up.” *The Local*. The Local, 6 Nov. 2014. Web. 28 Sept. 2015.

<<http://www.thelocal.fr/20141106/french-speakers-world-language-english>>.

Goldberg, David, Dennis Looney, and Natalia Lusin. *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2013*. *Modern Language*

- Association*. MLA, Feb. 2015. Web. 17 Apr. 2015.
<https://www.mla.org/content/download/31180/1452509/2013_enrollment_survey.pdf>.
- Grafton, Anthony T., and James Grossman. "The Humanities in Dubious Battle." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Chronicle of Higher Educ., 1 Jul. 2013. Web. 21 May 2015.
<<http://chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-in-Dubious/140047/>>.
- Humphreys, Debra, and Patrick Kelly. "How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment: A Report on Earnings and Long-Term Career Paths." *Association of American Colleges and Universities*. Assn. of Amer. Colls. and Us, 22 Jan. 2014. Web. 25 Apr. 2015. <<https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/publications/how-liberal-arts-and-sciences-majors-fare-employment-report/>>.
- McDonald, Christie, and Susan Rubin Suleiman, eds. *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.
- MLA Office of Research. *Data on Second Majors in Language and Literature, 2001–13*. *Modern Language Association*. MLA, Feb. 2015. Web. 30 May 2015.
<<http://www.mla.org/pdf/2ndmajors200113.pdf>>.
- Nussbaum, Bruce. "Get Creative!" *Bloomberg*. Bloomberg, 31 Jul. 2005. Web. 1 June 2015.
<<http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/stories/2005-07-31/get-creative/>>.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.
- Snow, C. P. *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1961. Print.
- "The Status of French in the World." *France Diplomatie*. French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Intl. Development, 2015. Web. 13 Oct. 2015. <<http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/francophony-1113/the-status-of-french-in-the-world/>>.
- Strauss, Valerie. "What the Heck Is Going on with Wisconsin Public Education?" *Answer Sheet*. *The Washington Post*. Washington Post, 28 May 2015. Web. 30 May 2015.
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2015/05/28/what-the-heck-is->

[going-on-with-wisconsin-public-education/](#)>.

The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future. Harvard University. Arts and Humanities Division, Harvard U, 31 May 2013. Web. 13 Oct. 2015. <http://artsandhumanities.fas.harvard.edu/files/humanities/files/mapping_the_future_31_may_2013.pdf>.

Wilde, Oscar. *A Woman of No Importance*. *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Vintage, 1988. 125–218. Print.

Zakaria, Fareed. *In Defense of a Liberal Education*. New York: Norton, 2015. Print.