



The Incomprehensible

The Critical Rhetoric of
Philippe-Joseph Salazar



Editor: Jaco Barnard-Naudé

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Messianic hopes at the moral carnival – The [rhetorical] question of advocating for the humanities, for now

ERIK DOXTADER*

for Philippe – 5x5 and leading light

Why must the humanities be defended? What is to be said in their name? This inquiry does not seek to make a case for the humanities. It is rather concerned with what happens in contemporary advocacy that contends for the value of the humanities, the myriad arguments that take on the responsibility of speaking for the humanities and expressing the good for which the humanities are thought responsible. In all of this work, in so many efforts to argue the humanities, what remains uncomprehended, and indeed what is regularly set aside as simply incomprehensible, is the work of rhetorical-argument itself, the contingent conditions, dynamics and power of a response, the response-ability on which a comprehension of the humanities may yet depend.

*Step quick and step up – for a chance to say your piece about the humanities.
Get three claims through the hoop and have fun doing it. Defend the faith.
The greater the piety, the bigger the prize! Everyone is a winner!*

Yes indeed, welcome to the carnival, the show that never ends – until it pulls up stakes and leaves town under the cover of darkness. If one might wish otherwise, we have not arrived at a more or less Bakhtinian bacchanalia of self-relinquishment (usually operationalised in more or less inebriated pleas to ‘show us your ... literature!’). Not so much. Though sometimes attached to local and provincial fairs, with their displays of homegrown vegetables and livestock, the carnival – or funfair – is a properly retro ‘stick and rag’ show. Trucked-in, unfolded and opened in rural fields and empty urban lots by ‘flying squadrons’ that follow ‘red arrows’ to the ‘next jump’, this midway without a proper circus is announced with ‘paper’ that tempts ‘marks’ with sights

* Professor of Rhetoric, University of South Carolina, USA.

unseen and ‘swag’ to bring home.¹ Once arrived – parking is extra – there is no cause to fret the crowd, if there is one. The corndogs will ease the pain, at least if they are eaten *after* riding the high-flying-spinning rides, all of which show a bit too much rust and sound a bit too much clatter, a disconcerting if not fear-inducing fragility that speaks to the somewhat detached machinations of a largely invisible corporation. In whatever order they are consumed, the tilt-a-whirl and the cotton candy will always cost a bit too much and come with no assurance of satisfaction beyond their procurement after waiting in an inexplicably slow line, an interval that renders legs sore and ears tired. Indeed, the barkers are relentless with their endless and competing invocations to part with a coin in the name of a prize that will confirm one’s worldly skills and impress one’s companion. Be warned though – to play such games is to confront humility, and more than likely, a bit of humiliation if the fix is on, which it is. Of course, we should have known better, although it is difficult not to be distracted, to keep one’s bearings in faux alleys beset with blinking lights and bells and whistles, all of which conspire to keep us playing and paying beyond the time that we had hoped to depart.

Precisely what are we doing at the carnival? What is to be said in the name of the humanities? There is a deep resonance between these questions. But, to be clear from the turnstile at the front gate, it is not that the carnival discloses the problems that motivate so much humanistic inquiry, or that the midway is a manifestation of modernity’s passage through and into the humanism that stages this or that dialectic of enlightenment.² And while perhaps tempting, it is also not that the carnival affords space to reflect on the popular charge that the humanities are an unproductive, unedifying and overpriced distraction. All in all, if the carnival symbolises a cheap date that we cannot really afford, what follows is not an attempt to grasp, indeed comprehend, the humanities through the operations of the midway, or linger with maniacal critics bent on demonstrating that the classroom

¹ On the American and British-Euro carnival ‘lingo’, see American Circus Lingo, available at http://goodmagic.com/carny/c_a.htm.

² What follows here is not meant to rule out such an inquiry. For an important reflection that relies somewhat on the figure of the carnival, see S Wynter ‘The ceremony must be found: After Humanism’ (1984) 12 *boundary 2* 19.

door (to say nothing of faculty research) marks the threshold of the (socialist-activist-leftist) freak show. Indeed, such inquiries require a kind of deliberate miscomprehension, an overlooking and mis-taking of the obvious: the carnival is trite. Its attractions neither astound nor confuse (nor indoctrinate, except perhaps for the deep-fried butter). Beyond an unfulfilling self-indulgence, the carnival calls for the suspension of disbelief in the midst of a self-betraying façade. It is then exceptional. Demanding a complicity that brushes the edge of hypocrisy, the midway's promise is a tenuous metaphor, a relation strained to the point of a hyperbole. It is a conceit.

We understand this, though it is considered inappropriate to say so aloud. Long before we arrive, and for the duration of the tired ride home, we grasp that the carnival does not deliver. We understand the fib that the carnival asks us (not) to tell, the white lie (of its white mythology) that leaves us with the never-quite-answered question of how we ended up here in the first place. Year after year, appeals to the 'needs' of the children and invocations of a 'tradition' that no one can quite recall do not really cut it. The carnival's many lights and inviting booths promise what they then refuse to provide; the midway's gastronomy begs the question of its consumption; and its grand attraction, the romantic Ferris Wheel, precludes lateral motion (one hopes), takes us aloft for a single view, and rocks us back and forth in an effort to obscure how we have spent most of our time waiting in line to get on and off in one spot.

None of this composes a picture of the humanities. And yet, all of this, quite precisely, can be said about the contemporary efforts to *advocate for* the humanities. Indeed, it is not a stretch to suggest that the carnival's conceit allegorises so very much of the work dedicated to explaining and defending the value of the humanities. More than a few will find this suggestion dour, unkind, or perhaps even disloyal – *is now the moment to pledge allegiance?* It is not, however, a prelude to yet another vitriol-laden rant against the humanities, the likes of which appear on a weekly basis and subvent so much 'reporting' on higher education.³ Nor is it the beginning of another round of the ever-popular game, 'read the

³ For a laundry list of charges, with a bibliography, see S Sinclair 'Confronting the criticisms: A survey of attacks on the humanities' *4Humanities*

great books to save soul and society'.⁴ Still, in the same breath, it is increasingly plain that a lack of self-critique – frequently manifest in the hubris of an ‘affirmative’ gesture that is not always easy to distinguish from narcissism – has wreaked more than a bit of havoc. Too often bedazzled by its own curiosity-banishing piety, the so-called ‘humanities’ have been mobilised and swept into a normalised panic, a frenzied and permanent campaign dedicated to defending the virtue of its good, often a so-called ‘public good’ – *of course, the humanities are an important and valuable thing, for everyone!* – against the charges of the nay-sayers, gainsayers and more than a few of the soothsayers. The result is a near fundamentalism, with little time – *the siege is on!* – and less patience – *there is no room for heresy!* – for questions of the word, that is, inquiry into the grounds, terms and dynamics of the advocacy that contends in the name of the humanities and claims to defend their honour.

This inattention is troubling – and it is telling. Why do advocates hold that it is strictly *necessary* to advocate for the humanities? How does this alleged necessity structure and perhaps limit the work of giving voice to the merits of humanistic inquiry? How do standing defences of the humanities (mis)comprehend the potential of their own arguments and dismiss criticism as so much incomprehensible gibberish? What does this (lack of) power cost? In short, how are the humanities argued? Before anything else, it must be made clear that this very question, the very posing of the question, expresses a profound debt. The entirety of Philippe-Joseph Salazar’s body of work testifies and indeed demonstrates the importance of this question, independent of the humanities, but then again perhaps at their very heart, the importance of asking after how an idea, concept, opinion, policy or practice is argued, how it is rendered and set forth in rhetorical arguments. And there is perhaps no one more skilled than Salazar at revealing such arguments, how they work and what they do, for better and for worse, from the constitution of an African Athens to the nation-building efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to the rise of ISIS and

9 October 2012, available at <https://4humanities.org/2012/10/confronting-the-criticisms/>.

⁴ Of recent interest in the genre, see R. Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (2021) and A. Weinstein *The Lives of Literature: Reading, Teaching, Knowing* (2022).

the emergence of the alt-right. What is being argued? On what do the arguments turn? What do they (not) comprehend, as territory to be taken, experience to be had, or unity formed in so many words? Do the arguments trade in dogmatism or afford a basis for judgment? And so, what is the precise difference between a better and worse argument?

And with respect to the humanities? At different points and turns, Salazar has considered the humanities as argued, in the midst of arguing. Though somewhat quietly, the concern appears at the close of *Paroles Armées (Words are Weapons)*,⁵ a reflection on how an inattention to the humanities – as if they were dead and so what remains is ‘nothing but dialogue, conversation, management, sensible procedures, and temperance’⁶ – discounts their rhetorical grounds and comes at the cost of the very ‘power of letters’⁷ the ‘weighted words’⁸ that can and very much do matter, the will to speak that knows better than to forsake the ‘power of speech’.⁹ Over the course of a vital essay in which Salazar takes flight over the South African intellectual landscape, it is clear that this neglect is not benign, particularly for the humanities themselves, as they are reduced to a monologic enterprise and set out as a totem, a figure that stands on the basis of so many slogans and takes its standing for granted, an instantiation of *idios* that has little understanding of the defence that the humanities so self-righteously demand when things do not go their way, which oddly enough is more often than not.¹⁰

Today, what we confront is not simply a failure of one argument or another on behalf of the humanities, but the much more basic failure to ‘develop our own game’,¹¹ as Salazar puts it, a near complete inattention to the conditions, entailments and dynamics of making a case for the humanities. How are the humanities argued? There is good cause to investigate this question, though what unfolds here is certainly provisional and incomplete, likely

⁵ Ph-J Salazar *Words are Weapons: Inside ISIS’s Rhetoric of Terror* (2017).

⁶ Ibid at 204.

⁷ Ibid at 201.

⁸ Ibid at 205.

⁹ Ibid at 204.

¹⁰ Ph-J Salazar ‘Rituals of complicity, the “humanities” rhetoric and the closing of the South African mind’ (2012) 38 *Social Dynamics* 48.

¹¹ Ibid.

all the more so for its rather too American focus, though there are surely some aspects of the inquiry that can travel. In the end, one reply to the question is that the work of arguing for the humanities has the air and the sound of a ‘moral carnival’,¹² a case that spares no effort in touting the profound responsibility for which the humanities are responsible while sparing nearly every effort to ask after the conditions, dynamics and power of a response, the response-ability on which a comprehension of the humanities may yet depend.

I THE SMALL THRILL OF PLAYING WITH GRAVITY – OR, THE NECESSITY OF ADVOCACY

From the ricochet of the bumper cars to the hit-and-miss quality of the games, the carnival is stitched with an action-reaction logic that well-describes the contemporary impulse to advocate for the humanities. There is a near inexorable pull to oppose dyed-in-the-blue vocationalists (for example, Dr Biden, PhD) who would level higher education to its lowest common denominator, and bleeding-red anti-intellectuals who resent the very idea of an informed public and would sooner privatisate it all in the name of the divine. There is little resisting the urge to rebut the persistent and cutting accusation that student debt to future income ratios are proof that the humanities are not value for money. It can be quite satisfying to contend that any and every living ‘stem’ presupposes rich soil, viable seeds and circulatory systems that carry the water and make good with the light. With a ‘new normal’ of pandemic virtuality and the fully monetised dreams of metaverse ‘life’, it seems imperative to rally for the lived experience that has long defined humanities-based inquiry. And there seems no denying the call to defend the critical, ethical and political promise that inheres in the humanities, not least by showing precisely how its good news holds the key to decolonising its own gospel.

The problems queue, multiply, intersect and compound, a somewhat rag-tag constellation of what Walter Ong once counted as some ‘some sixty-odd charges and subcharges that the humanities

¹² The notion appears in Céline in a way that is perhaps much less transferable than it is suggestive. See L-F Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* translated by R Manheim (1983) at 97.

today must answer if their case is to be cleared'.¹³ All of them press, though with various and variable force, some over centuries and others in recurring moments, a dynamic that has been recently cast as the 'permanent crisis' that defines the humanities.¹⁴ Many are taken as hostile intrusions, as they are heard to question the 'mission' and trouble the 'legitimacy' of the humanities, and so demand a full reply, a response that is not without its resentment, the perceived trade-off with 'real work'. Thus, there has always been a steady supply of more or less outward facing books, more than a few of which offer themselves as primers for those on the inside, a guide to saying what needs to be said in the name of the humanities. If the precise quantity of this work has varied, not least perhaps in relation to the experience of economic downturn, political division and war, this steady stream is now a flood, a cascading but often curiously dry effort to breathe new life into the trivium's spirit and to protect the soul-enhancing and ethics-instilling uni-on-a-hill from conservative barbarians, wily neo-liberals, peddlers of institutional-corporate systems theory, administrating neo-positivists and social scientists pandering to hysteria over the imprecise 'outcomes' of a humanities-based education.¹⁵

Aware that the humanities remain a bit addled about the difference between prose-production and publicity, more than a few think tanks and academies backstop the contemporary book fair with easy-on-the-eyes reports, all of them filled with pithy testimonials and lofty proclamations as to how the humanities are nothing less than the key to remembering 'where we have been' and the basis for imagining 'where we are going' – telos,

¹³ W Ong 'Crisis and understanding in the humanities' (1969) 98 *Daedalus* 617.

¹⁴ P Reitter & C Wellmon *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (2021). The position can be usefully compared with L Menand's claim in *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (2010) that '[a]bout twenty years ago, the humanities acquired a rationale problem' (at 61).

¹⁵ The phenomenon of the torrent is itself an interesting question, the impossibility of reading all there is to read. A few of the recent and oft-cited works in the debate are: GG Harpham *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (2011); R Bod *A New History of the Humanities* translated by L Richards (2013); P Brooks (ed) *The Humanities and Public Life* (2014); M Berube & J Ruth *The Humanities, Higher Education & Academic Freedom* (2015); H Small *The Value of the Humanities* (2016); S Ahmed *Archeology of Babel: The Colonial Foundation of the Humanities* (2018); WB Drees *What Are the Humanities For?* (2021).

it seems, appears best on high-gloss.¹⁶ And while these tracts consistently arrive too late to mollify incensed legislators and outraged governors, they serve well to prop open the door for the pundits and essayists, one and all eager to tout this week's silver bullet: engage the public, end tenure, write greater books, radicalise multiculturalism, theorise nothing, instil civility, digitise everything, serve the customer ... and so on.¹⁷ Meanwhile, back on the hill, general education curriculums are adjusted, if not radically revised, to meet 'new realities', collectives are formed in the name of dialogue and publicity, and administrators plead on bent knee that their humanities faculties might reach out and explain themselves to hesitant students, suspicious parents, dubious citizens and (gasp) perhaps even one another. And on more days than not, as associate deans in charge of defending the realm pen op-ed after op-ed for local papers that no one reads anymore,

¹⁶ American Academy of Arts & Sciences *The Humanities in American Life At a Glance* (2020), available at <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/The-Humanities-in-American-Life.pdf>; American Academy of Arts & Sciences *The State of the Humanities 2018: Graduates in the Workforce and Beyond* (2018), available at https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/HI_Workforce-2018.pdf; American Academy of Arts & Sciences *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive and Secure Nation* (2013), available at <https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/AAU%20Files/Key%20Issues/Humanities/Heart-of-the-Matter-The-Humanities-and-Social-Sciences-for-a-Vibrant-Competitive-and-Secure-Nation.pdf>; M Terras, E Priego & A Liu et al 'The humanities matter!' (2013) Infographic *4Humanities*, available at <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/7450/6/humanitiesmatter300.pdf>; #WeAreHumanistic 'Covid-19 and the key role of the humanities and social sciences in the United States' (2020), available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/kyk32sulwyo0gth/Statement%20on%20COVID-19%20Final%20-%20082320.pdf?dl=0>; M Bunzl 'The humanities as spectacle' (2014) *MLA Profession*, available at [https://profession\(mla.org/the-humanities-as-spectacle](https://profession(mla.org/the-humanities-as-spectacle)).

¹⁷ See B Schmidt 'The humanities are in crisis' *The Atlantic* 23 August 2018, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisisof-confidence/567565/>; J Connolly 'The assault on the humanities and social sciences' *Medium* 6 April 2021, available at <https://medium.com/acls-in-depth-today/the-assault-on-the-humanities-59af07a362ed>; K Osther 'Humanities as essential services' *Inside Higher Education* 21 May 2020, available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/05/21/how-humanities-can-be-part-front-line-response-pandemic-opinion>; L Wiesteltier 'Crimes against humanities: Now science wants to invade the liberal arts. Don't let it happen' *New Republic* 4 September 2013, available at <https://newrepublic.com/article/114548/leon-wieseltier-responds-steven-pinkers-scientism>.

the humanities have the air and urgency of a social movement, complete with national organisations to lobby government and speak for the people.¹⁸

Does it need to be said? Speaking up for the humanities is an open and ongoing order of the day – everyday!¹⁹ And we should make no mistake – it is an *order*. Confronted with nothing less than a war against their work, according to Stephen Behrendt, the humanities ‘must be courageously fought for, passionately defended, and resolutely preserved’.²⁰ As Martha Nussbaum puts it, we must fashion and articulate a ‘call to action’²¹ in the face of a ‘silent crisis’.²² Despite a worry that scholars in the humanities have a tendency to enjoy their symptoms, Geoffrey Harpham contends that humanists ‘must insist and demonstrate that it makes sense for both the state and individuals to support what they do’.²³ Looking into the face of legislatively sponsored vocationalism and the allure of STEM fields, Michael Roth heralds the need to demand such liberal education as can ‘resist the straitjackets of conventional formulas’.²⁴ The bind is pressing.

Confronting declining enrolments and holding that ‘the survival of a liberal arts education depends on recognising its value for democracy and resisting its vanquishing by the market’,²⁵ Wendy Brown laments that ‘there is not much hope and not much time’²⁶ for the humanities to make their case. In other words, as

¹⁸ In addition to the American National Endowment for the Humanities, see the National Humanities Alliance, the World Humanities Report and #WeAreHumanistic.

¹⁹ And for some time now. For example, see G Levine, P Brooks & J Culler et al ‘Speaking for the humanities’ (1989) *ACLS Occasional Paper No. 7*, available at http://archives.acls.org/op/7_Speaking_for_Humanities.htm.

²⁰ SC Behrendt ‘The relevance and resiliency of the humanities’ (2017) *MLA Profession*, available at <https://profession.mla.org/the-relevance-and-resiliency-of-the-humanities/>.

²¹ MC Nussbaum *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010) 122.

²² *Ibid* at 1.

²³ Harpham (n 15) 189.

²⁴ M Roth ‘Thinking for oneself’ *Inside Higher Education* 12 November 2013, available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/11/12/essay-whats-missing-discussion-humanities>.

²⁵ W Brown ‘The end of educated democracy’ (2011) 116 *Representations* 19 at 36.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

everyone with an iron in the fire knows, now, again, is a crucial time, an extended and open moment in which there is no choice. The humanities require advocacy, the voice that will see them through the current attack and pre-empt the next one. A good word for the humanities is crucial to rebuilding their lagging material, institutional and emotional support. Now is the time to speak in the name of that higher education which defies vocationalism and resists neoliberalism, a calling that 'reminds us' and 'teaches us how to be human'. In this nothing less than 'soul-forming'²⁷ education, as Cornel West and Jeremy Tate recently put it, much is at stake, perhaps everything.

It is now or never – and perhaps always. The case for the humanities must be made. Moreover, this case must be clear, convincing and disseminated widely, which means, according to the conventional wisdom, that it must not depend on 'rhetorical ploy[s]'²⁸ and it must move the humanities beyond their present position – 'knee-deep in the rhetoric of crisis'²⁹ – in a way that allows them to articulate what they 'do'.³⁰ Those in the humanities must be 'true to themselves while making the case for our centrality in higher education patiently, persistently, and more effectively'.³¹ Here and now, as Earl Lewis, a past president of the Andrew Mellon Foundation, has put it: 'We need to craft a narrative that is consistent with a clear thesis that everyone can understand'.³² It should be a public interaction, according to many advocates, one that takes care to communicate, foster understanding and promote engagement.

²⁷ C West & J Tate 'Howard University's removal of classics is a spiritual catastrophe' *Washington Post* 19 April 2021, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/19/cornel-west-howard-classics/>.

²⁸ RJ Franke 'The power of the humanities and a challenge to humanists' (2009) 138 *Daedalus* 13.

²⁹ M Ty 'Introduction: Higher education on its knees' (2011) 20 *Qui Parle* 3.

³⁰ Also see the 2014 special issue of *Daedalus* addressed to 'what humanists do'.

³¹ P Burian 'Defending the humanities' *Inside Higher Education* 25 June 2012, available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/06/25/essay-how-defend-humanities>.

³² E Lewis, quoted in J Ruark 'Humanities scholars grapple with their pitch to the public' *Chronicle of Higher Education* 12 May 2014, available at <https://www.chronicle.com/article/humanities-scholars-grapple-with-their-pitch-to-the-public/>.

If all of this aims for the better, it also points to the fact that ‘defending the humanities frequently takes the form of debating the ground on which such a defense can or should be made’,³³ while steadfastly ignoring the question of what might be involved in the work of making and articulating a case. Indeed, one searches rather in vain for any recognition of the irony involved in a call for advocacy that disavows rhetoric, let alone advocacy that works in the name of that which owes more than a little to the trivium. But then again, as Rens Bod boldly declaims in his recent ‘new’ history of the humanities, ‘rhetoric no longer exists as an independent discipline’,³⁴ a position echoed by Harvard historian James Hankins, who is convinced, for reasons that raise questions about what evidence means in history these days, that ‘courses on rhetoric … have long been abandoned in universities’.³⁵ In call after call to defend the humanities, including the less edgy than tedious (leather-pants-at-MLA) sub-genre dedicated to the contention that we *must not* defend the humanities, there is no doubt that a good tale can be fashioned and little question that the proper non-rhetorical narrative will be a good thing, just the kind of expression that the humanities need.³⁶ And though it may be ubiquitous and deep beyond despair, the crisis to be addressed is not something that appears capable of complicating, let alone thwarting, the non-rhetorical ‘communicating’ gesture that the humanities so desperately need. Just as comforting, there is evidently no reason to worry that the means and ends of such gestures are themselves deeply contested within the humanities.

³³ M Swacha ‘Should we justify the humanities? A round table with David Damrosch, Lois Zamora, and Marianne Hirsch’ (2014) 51 *Comparative Literature Studies* 587 at 588. See also Levine et al (n 19) and RH Bloch ‘What words are worth: In defense of the humanities’ (2009) 30 *Humanities*.

³⁴ Bod (n 14) at 58; J Hankins ‘How not to defend the humanities’ (2017) 1 *American Affairs*.

³⁵ DG Meyers ‘How not to speak for the humanities (1989) 7 *The New Criterion* 85 at 88.

³⁶ For examples of the ‘do not make a defence of the humanities’, see J Stover ‘There is no case for the humanities’ *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 4 March 2018, available at <https://www.chronicle.com/article/there-is-no-case-for-the-humanities/>; S During ‘Stop defending the humanities’ *Public Books* 25 August 2020, available at <https://www.publicbooks.org/stop-defending-the-humanities/>.

All of this needs to be worked out a bit. And while there will be time to consider the ‘message’, it is best to begin by reflecting briefly on what is involved in the call, and indeed the demand, to advocate for the humanities. What is the claimed need for such advocacy – why is it deemed urgent if not necessary? What are its assumed and announced conditions, the grounds on which it is possible to give voice? What do these conditions betray about the current state of the humanities – what does the call for advocacy suggest and assume with regard to the history, purpose and value of its would-be object? What capacity to speak is entailed in coming to voice for the humanities and giving voice to the humanities? And how might the humanities themselves complicate such advocacy? Individually and together, these are perhaps the less-asked questions, the rhetorical questions that are set aside as such, as rhetorical and so as what is best taken for granted in the name of making a case against those preparing to storm the gates. Never mind the inquiry, the theory, which is proscribed as the risk of stultifying meta-talk, a confrontation with the contingency of language that gets in the way of what needs to be said? Perhaps. Or perhaps we should take a moment to mind, so as not to beg quite so much of the question at hand.

Advocate – for the humanities! The opening call is simple and emphatic, an incitement perhaps, a near categorical demand to be sure – defend the realm, part and whole. Come to terms and sing the praises. And yet, before commencing to listen, it is important to consider that the song may be a round: to advocate for the humanities is to give voice to that which has long been dedicated to questioning, cultivating and containing the power of voice, the ground and range of its expressions, and the good of its art. At the heart of the humanities, as Peter Brooks puts it, there is a ‘responsibility toward language’,³⁷ a commitment that appears in the tensions between the ‘orators and philosophers’³⁸ that Bruce Kimball finds less at the origin than in the recurring beginning of the humanities, a moment given to questions of speech, dialogue, interpretation, debate, deliberation and the turn to written expression. In William Drees’ recent account, the unity of the

³⁷ P Brooks ‘Introduction’ in P Brooks (ed) *The Humanities and Public Life* (2014) 6.

³⁸ BA Kimball *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (1986).

humanities in their relative diversity is that they are a second-order activity, a function of the fact that ‘as humans we express ourselves’³⁹ and that ‘we need language’⁴⁰ to define, understand and act with one another. In this light, it is little surprise that Rens Bod’s ‘new history’ begins with the proposition that ‘since the nineteenth century the humanities have generally been defined as the *disciplines that investigate the expressions of the human mind*’,⁴¹ or that Siraj Ahmed’s archaeology works to uncover an ‘instrumental philology’, the ‘language-based approach to humanity’s origins and development that emerged with the philological revolution and served as the epistemic foundation of colonial rule’.⁴² In short, the humanities are that in which language is a question and a problem, for the very definition of the humanities, a subject matter and attitude, in Richard McKeon’s estimation, given to arts and sciences that are ‘the peculiar possession of man alone among animals’,⁴³ a concern that very likely begins with the word, the faculty and possession of language long held to define the speaking animal’s nature and its culture.

The word is a question and answer, problem and solution, promise and betrayal. If the trivium’s roads – grammar, rhetoric and dialectic – are paths of discovery that constituted the ‘lower liberal arts’ and back-stopped the modern turn to philology on which the contemporary humanities set so much store, these courses run from (and toward) the ambiguity of *logos*, the word of words, the word that engenders as much as it blurs the line between reason, expression and act, the word that has long focused puzzlement, argument and polemic about the relation between language, speech and being, the word that drove the ancient struggle to come to terms with the terms that constitute the ‘civilised’, the city’s *homologeō* and its promise to stand against the barbarians, all of those deemed to lack proper words.⁴⁴ With what we now call

³⁹ Drees (n 15) 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid at 7.

⁴¹ Bod (n 14) at 1 (emphasis in the original).

⁴² Ahmed (n 15) 9.

⁴³ R McKeon ‘The nature and teaching of the humanities’ in ZK McKeon & WG Swenson (eds) *The Selected Writings of Richard McKeon. Volume II: Culture, Education, and the Arts* (2005) 237–8.

⁴⁴ Kimball (n 38) 14–29; G Agamben & M Robison ‘Speech and knowledge’ (2010) 31 *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 11; E Hall *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (1991).

philosophy, rhetoric, politics and ethics hanging in the balance, the name ‘humanities’ reaches back through the Roman *humanitas* to Greek *paideia*, a history loaded (perhaps tragically) with the problem of the word, the tense relation between expression, meaning and (inter)action.⁴⁵

Modernity inherited and perhaps emerged through this puzzle, a Rubik’s cube that promised, with the proper turns, to disclose the ‘rational animal’ that would transcend the onto-epistemic-political tension between the truth of expression and the expression of truth. As Foucault observed in *The Order of Things (Les Mots et les choses)*,⁴⁶ the modern formation of the humanities not only contains, but in a basic sense rests, on the question of advocacy (*ad voco*), the way in which voice is given in the name of becoming a human being. In his terms:

the object of the human sciences is not language (though it is spoken by men alone); it is that being which, from the interior of the language by which he is surrounded, represents to himself, by speaking, the sense of the words or propositions he utters, and finally provides himself with a representation of language itself.⁴⁷

Note the assumption and movement here. With language as both its subject and object, this human science (that is ‘not a science at all’) tacks between ‘rediscovering some primary word’ and ‘disturbing the words we speak, of denouncing the grammatical habits of our thinking, of dissipating the myths that animate our words, of rendering once more noisy and audible the element of silence that all discourse carries with as it is spoken’.⁴⁸ This is to say, as a matter of saying, that with the ‘recovery’ of Aristotle from the impulses of Scholasticism, the modern humanities struggle with the alignment of speaking being and human being – the being named and *falsely* attributed to Aristotle as ‘*zoon logon ekhon*’ – and what, if anything, can be made of the work of (its) founding words, the constitution of (its) beginnings in which the necessity

⁴⁵ McKeon (n 43) 238. For an interesting history, see M Elsky *Authorizing Words: Speech, Writing, and Print in the English Renaissance* (1989).

⁴⁶ M Foucault *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1973).

⁴⁷ *Ibid* at 353.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* at 297.

of ‘speaking being’ cannot be detached from its potential, as what is and is not at once, as what might then yet be otherwise.⁴⁹

In the name of the word that it cannot fully name, the humanities speak then to a ‘constant self-examination’ of (its) language, an inquiry that may well prove unbearable, bound as it is to conditions of (its own) being’s (im)possibility, a contingency filled with promise and riddled with terror, as the lifeworld’s life-word is found, lost and found again. This is neither definition nor history, so much as a reminder of a so-far inextricable connection between the humanities and the question of language, including the question of what the humanities themselves have to say for themselves, with and within the language to which they are indebted, through which they are inspired and by which they are confounded. It is a rather clear indication that while this question is held by the humanities with more, and often quite a bit less, care and pursued in myriad directions for better and worse reasons, the task of standing up and defending the humanities is not necessarily a straightforward task and perhaps not a matter of necessity. The call to speak up for the humanities may well be a plea to advocate for that which holds and perhaps holds open the question of advocacy, the entailments of giving a voice, a voice that may or may not be a given. What, then, are the grounds of such a case, the basis for speaking *about* the humanities? Does the call to speak *for* the humanities interrupt, distort or even rig humanities-based inquiry into the work of works? Does it advance, diminish or even erase the question of language – as a question – from within the midst of the humanities?

Enough with the distracting postmodern ‘meta-talk’ – it is time to be practical, speak up and advocate for the humanities! Today, on any given day, the demand to advocate for the humanities may call for a defence of intellectual traditions, ways of learning, modes of being, experience and expression, forms of thought and inquiry, commitments to creativity, self-reflection and world-making, types of knowledge, kinds of judgements and/or circuits of power. Any or all of these operations may appear in different locations – a discourse, bodies of faculties and students, classrooms, texts, traditions – any and all of which may or may not support the

⁴⁹ E Doxtader ‘*Zoon Logon Ekhon*: (Dis)possessing an echo of barbarism’ (2017) 50 *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 452.

humanities as a pedagogy, way of life, history, tradition, ideology or vision of society, culture or politics. Individually and together, these commonplaces offer various and sometimes competing views about the ways and means of advocating for the humanities. To give voice – as voice – may amount to an art (for its own sake or not), a productive science, a (re)making of subjects, a promotion of self-interest, an enactment of commentary, criticism, rebuttal or critique, a public good, a judgement, an ethical-moral responsibility to a constituency (or species), a tedious departure from honest work, an undue concession to misguided critics, a reductionist ploy to enlighten audiences who fear complexity and/or a way of securing tradition, knowledge, money or legitimacy.

The point is less to catalogue than to recognise that calls to advocate for the humanities tend to begin by simultaneously under-naming and over-naming their announced object. It is not clear what they are talking *about*. On first and second hearing, there is no telling what this urgent call refers *to* and what or whom it might speak *for*. There is little concern for the referential and representational conditions of advocacy. Thus, often as a stipulation of practicality, the humanities are taken to be obvious (this will become important shortly), no matter whether such an assumption begs the question of what might be entailed in advocating for that which gives voice and yet seems unable to find its own voice. And in all of this, there is frequently an assumption that everything about everything (it is the humanities after all) can be uttered in a single breath. Basic questions thus follow. Precisely what of the humanities requires a good word? Does the demand to speak up for the humanities presuppose what the humanities themselves are charged to create? Does advocacy *for* the humanities amount to an expression *by* the humanities? If not, what are we talking about and where are the words coming from? It may well be that all this meta-talk is distracting. Perhaps though it pulls us toward the question of *logos* and against the force of that ‘plain-spoken pragmatism’⁵⁰ that anchors so much talk about the humanities, and which Hannah Arendt saw as a way to rationalise education divested of an interest in teaching.

⁵⁰ H Arendt ‘The crisis in education’ in H Arendt (ed) *Between Past and Future* (1993) 182–3.

Such hair-splitting is an undue privilege if not a luxury in a time of crisis – the humanities must rally and defend themselves! Now! Here then is the crux of the matter, a battle-cry predicated on the necessity of self-defence in the face of life-draining attack.⁵¹ Contrary to easy and endless quibbling over whether this or that crisis is the real threat – will STEM steamroll? Are enrolments in the toilet? Is vocationalism overtaking imagination? The question at hand is held in the term ‘crisis’ itself, the question of how to judge when the basis for judgement is neither given nor stable. The humanities are *in crisis* as they stand accused of having lost the capacity for good judgement. Today, this accusation tends to take two basic forms: the cost of humanistic inquiry outruns the worth of its payoff and the humanities covertly inculcate ways of thinking and acting that neither address nor serve the interests of students, public constituencies and larger society. Neither a good value nor capable of articulating good values, the humanities stand charged with both failure and deceit – they *do not say what they do* and they *do not do what they say they do*. Or put in a slightly different way, in line with the vernacular of politics and public culture, the humanities are merely but somehow also dangerously ‘rhetorical’ – they can neither speak forthrightly nor honestly on their own behalf. This accusation is the crisis, the trouble that calls for response but upsets the grounds on which to respond.

And so the advocates rally against a charge that calls into question what the humanities *can* say in their own name, and so resonates as an existential threat – there *must* be a reply. It is *necessary* to advocate for the humanities and it is necessary to defend the humanities as a necessity – a necessary good. Such work frequently begins by refiguring crisis as an external event, a problem induced by those on the outside of the humanities, those outside the city who lack the true and proper word. This line is drawn with startling ease, all the better for naming the philistines as such and tracking their movements. It is a self-justifying imperial gesture, regardless of the merits, a recollection if not repetition of the colonial assumption of a so-called civil(ising) word, always, of course, for the ‘benefit’ of the barbarians that do not know what they are talking about – soon enough standing, but not today. And it all rather smacks of insecurity, as the incoherent ravings of the

⁵¹ See Harpham (n 15).

shock-jock pundits and pandering governors make it rather easy to resist the question of what might count as a valid criticism and instead hear and take it all as an attack, an indiscriminate assault that marks the imminent collapse of coherent thought, cultivated expression and caring interest, all of which renders a defence of the humanities as nothing less than indispensable. Something *must* be said in the name of the humanities which *must* be articulated. If outside (read: unqualified) critics do not care for what they hear from the humanities, the reply from the inside (read: authentic) is that these attacks are ill-informed and disingenuous. So accused, the ‘rhetorical’ humanities fire back with the same, in preparation to defend the house with the right and proper words.

And thus the merry-go-round begins to turn, a rather dull movement for those no longer toddlers, a slow and inexorable circle that likely begs several questions of interest. For one, the proposed necessity defence for the humanities – it is necessary to defend the necessity of the humanities – is curiously silent as to whether there are conditions in which directed, and perhaps even extreme, criticism of the humanities might constitute evidence that the humanities are in fact working – and working well. Though perhaps heresy for all involved, this possibility is no more sophistry than it is proof that critics are correct. That opponents of the humanities may or may not know what they are talking about does not rule out that, in professing a better or worse objection, they are undertaking the work of giving voice that not only falls within, but perhaps even energises, the mission of the humanities. Indeed, the questionable quality of such criticism, not least as it has come to shape collective opinion (and the allocation of state resources), may be precisely where the humanities are charged to begin (again), at least if there is still merit to Kant’s claim that the humanities contained in the lower faculty find their mission *only* as those whom they educate forget their lessons and that this mission fails at the moment it succumbs to declarations as to how things must be necessarily so.

What proof is in which pudding? Or has the pudding been spiked? This is to wonder after the precise threshold at which advocacy for the humanities becomes strictly necessary, particularly as such advocacy is implicitly or explicitly linked to that tradition in which the humanities are aligned with the promise of free expression and tasked with cultivating voice in the name of being.

While the default reply to the question is ‘we know the line when we see it’, this reply may be a rather passive-aggressive way of slipping past the compound tension that inheres within claims about the necessity of advocating for the humanities. On the one hand, such calls risk tautology – there must be advocacy for that which is given to advocacy, which is to say that the humanities must do what they have always done. On the other, these calls may entail a self-confounding concession – the plot has been interrupted if not lost, such that the possibility of advocacy is no longer a given and the humanities now require help saying what they do and doing what they say they have always done. But help from where? If the outside is so much incoherent and corrupt rhetoric, on what grounds can the case be fashioned? Referring simultaneously to a condition of plenitude and absence, the claim that advocacy is necessary presupposes the capacity to advocate that it promises to recover at the same time that it aims to recover that which it presupposes to be beyond question.

If only we took the time and made the effort to communicate what we do! And so the dilemma is wrapped in shiny paper and addressed to those deemed most at a ‘loss’ for the humanities, a convenient ‘object’ for humanities centre directors eager to have their Picardian moment – ‘engage’! Running through contemporary calls to advocate for the humanities, the appeal for more and better ‘communication’ is a ubiquitous and useful way of backstopping the contention that there is necessary cause to advocate for the humanities.⁵² Operating under any number of names, and in one stroke, the authentic communicative gesture is taken to relieve advocates of the need to reflect on whether the demand for advocacy amounts to the humanities (not) doing what they have always (not) done and it provides advocates with a way to proclaim their dialogic credentials (the equivalent of trust-fall exercises at corporate retreats) in distinction to critics who rely on the unseemly tools of persuasion such that they can neither hear properly nor enter into meaningful discussion. And so, with communication figured as tactic, the question of the word (*logos*)

⁵² For instance, see S Minz ‘Reimagining the humanities for the 21st century’ *Inside Higher Education* 15 October 2020, available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/reimagining-humanities-21st-century>.

is reserved by the humanities for the humanities, at the same time that the question – as a question – is subsumed by a pre-given norm that differentiates better and worse forms of interaction. Recalling Shannon and Weaver's message-receiver logic, the declared need for advocacy becomes a call for expression that moves strictly from inside to outside, from within the sealed folds of the humanities to those who can only remain on the outside, pending their conversion.

Such unidirectionality comes at a cost. It forecloses reflection on the conditions under which the claims of critics may amount to more than just so much noise at the same time that it insulates advocacy from inquiry into its own conceptual and historical presuppositions, including whether its claimed necessity – on behalf of the humanities – compels the use of particular commonplaces and select forms, a formula that reifies the very expression that the humanities are claimed to enliven. At the very least, the aria of 'let's communicate about the humanities' begs off on the questions of how advocacy for the humanities might be different from a humanities-based advocacy and, following quickly, whether there is a difference between the necessity of advocating for the humanities and the necessity of advocating for that necessity which is presumed to abide in the humanities themselves. If the former is papered over with overbroad strictures against 'essentialising', the latter is simply taken off the table. There is then little time and even less space to disclose that communication is a contested idea *inside* the humanities, not least as many consider it a rather lesser social science, just as there are few apparent incentives to ask how deep debate over what counts as the humanities might complicate efforts to communicate their necessity.

All will be well in a word, so long as it is not rhetorical. And while Gayatri Spivak's reflection on the dim future of the humanities – it will come to have the same status as opera does today – is quite right to point out how 'communicated action, including self-communicated action, is destined for errancy',⁵³ the diagnosis may succumb to the word's promise insofar as it claims that hope for the humanities lies with those bound by a

⁵³ G Chakravorty Spivak *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012) 26.

'shared obsession'⁵⁴ with its possibility, a group who 'cannot do otherwise'⁵⁵ but defend the humanities for all that they are truly worth.⁵⁶ Thus necessity speaks. Thus an admirable urge for creative expression may be unravelled by its piety, a self-certainty that assumes a vocation without considering what must be given in the name of its gift.

All aboard the tilt-a-whirl! One of the carnival's most basic premises is that gravity can be momentarily, but repeatedly, rigged to produce an exhilaration that feels like purpose so long as one forgets that the ride's wheels are locked to the track. One thinks of Aristotle's Megarians, which is simply to say that there is something suspicious about the claim that we *must* advocate for the humanities. The trouble is not that the humanities are somehow guilty of manufacturing crises to advance their own ends, though they may have serious trouble picking the right fights. Indeed, this frequently levelled accusation tends to overlook how the professed necessity of advocacy distorts and disfigures the idea of crisis itself, a moment that may be first a question of potential, an experience of contingency that invites judgement as to what may be otherwise or even not at all, including the grounds and force of judgement itself. This would include the humanities, but of course, as a matter of course, it never does. There must be a humanities tomorrow. There must be a response to the external – always from the outside – forces that would silence the humanities and foreclose on their 'educational opportunities'.⁵⁷ No matter the protreptic quality of crisis, an opening to the question of *logos*, how language, as McKeon put it, is itself part of the problem at hand. Necessarily, as the good 'communicative' narrative goes, there are words with which to advocate, an assumption that jumps the shark soon enough – there are necessarily words for advocating the necessity of the humanities. Put differently, the announced imperative to advocate for the humanities likely underwrites a self-replicating discursive economy that denies its status as such

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid at 26–8.

⁵⁷ A Callard 'What do the humanities do in a crisis?' *The New Yorker* 11 April 2020, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/what-do-the-humanities-do-in-a-crisis>.

(that is, the necessity of a function that can serve no necessary function) and manifests a troubling self-certainty, a way of being disinclined to hear anything that might threaten its own standing.

Make no mistake – this logic is familiar even if it is not all that clever. It is precisely the logic that the case to advocate for the humanities attributes to those heard to ‘oppose’ the humanities (all the more so in the affirmative turn – the disenchantment with critique). And so the game begins, a game ruled by the question-turned-accusation of hypocrisy. Everyone gets to rage. And rage they do. Well before the appearance of an actual case, the claimed necessity of advocating for the humanities strikes critics as a sign that the humanities have obscured their ideological self-interest and obfuscated their own fragmentation such that they cannot say what they are doing any more than they can do what they say they are doing. To this, the faithful reply in kind. Shifting between the positions that the humanities cannot not advocate and that advocacy is necessary because the humanities cannot (or no longer can) advocate, the call to defend the humanities finds its ‘necessity’ in the work of exposing ‘groundless’ accusations of irrelevance, revealing the unspoken agendas of critics, decrying the collapse of civil discourse, and whistling right past the question of the conditions under which criticism may in fact be proof of concept insofar as the *articulation* of the charge that the humanities do not have value is belied by the fact that it is, as it is articulated, an instantiation of the voice to which the humanities are given. More than confusing, the dynamic is unseemly. As everyone contends that no one is telling the truth, the prescribed need to speak for the humanities feeds and indeed legitimises a ‘mutual’ attribution of bad faith, a clash of ‘rhetorical’ accusations as to who is singing the wrong words in the wrong key with the wrong choir.

The humanities must be defended. What begins in the question of the word, in the mystery and possibility of the *logos*, in the problem of how the word defines and defiles being human, requires advocacy, the presence and power of voice. A case must be made. Critics must be answered. A promise must be kept. In the name of the humanities, one cannot not speak up, all the more so as such expression may be the very proof of their value. And all of this in the midst of the crisis, all of this in the midst of anxious contingency and at the limit of judgement, in a moment when the given words may not do, when there are not necessarily any necessary words,

when the only viable necessity is a need to ask what it might yet mean to give voice and how shared meaning might be recovered if not reconstituted. The humanities must be defended? Perhaps, though perhaps this common demand for advocacy reifies what it hopes to recognise, as it takes for granted what it opens to question and pays little mind to its own conditions. Thus, the faithful take – or fall into – a fully anti-theoretical posture. That is, there is no choice but to speak for what may be predicated on the work of finding words in which things might be otherwise; and, in the same breath, there is no question of speaking to what may be important precisely as it troubles the self-certain expression and upsets the given grounds of expression. And so here we are – trapped on the midway, nowhere and searching for something to do in the midst of a game that was rigged long before our arrival.

II LIFE ON THE MIDWAY – OR, THE INFINITE POTENTIAL OF BRIGHT LIGHTS, SHINY OBJECTS AND GOING IN CIRCLES AT SPEED

It is obvious – the oversized ball is not going to fall through the undersized hoop, not even for the meagre prize on offer. But it is time to play, and so play we shall, as if it is fun to be gently cheated and as if it is more than passing time, an inexpressible recognition, but a recognition nonetheless, that nothing is happening and will soon be forgotten. Not all potential counts as the breathy possibility of creative imagination. Some potential is dread, the endless waiting on what is yet but unlikely to happen, a disappointment attributed to fate and so deemed beyond the bounds of responsibility.

And so it may go with the humanities. It is obviously time to stand-up and speak-out (again) and it is obvious what needs to be said, despite the fact that this recurring, if not ritualised, effort will likely count (again) as a somehow ‘productive failure’ that nevertheless somehow matters – insert platitudes about the ‘slow boring of hard boards’ here. Indeed, on more days than not, as many advocates concede in less guarded moments, a good deal of the effort seems to produce little traction, not least with those who contend that the humanities are at their best when they lose their grip. It can make for a very nice cottage industry, however. And yet, inside the halls of the academy, faculty are frequently both

loathe to condescend to debates that strike them as demeaning to their vocation and deterred from weighing-in, to the extent that it is never quite clear who has the credentials to speak for ‘the humanities’. Things appear little better on the outside, as neither citizens nor their political representatives have much patience for recitations of well-trod and rarely evidenced promises, the tired and repetitive ad-copy of the next humanities initiative that strikes many as thin PR paint and thick proof of ideology. Sitting in-between and so true to their name, humanities centres endeavour to play both sides for a middle, a space in which the dialogic unicorn reveals the truth of the humanities to a properly diverse audience, never mind that most of those assembled were interested well before they arrived.

All of this *is* obvious – we have heard it again and again, perhaps to the point where we can no longer bear to listen. But what then to say? In the face of the demand to advocate for the humanities, where does one begin to stage a defence? As Judith Butler has observed, there are a number of commonplaces to which one might turn:

[T]he humanities have intrinsic value; the humanities are useless, and that is their value; public intellectuals exemplify the value of the humanities for public life; the humanities offer certain kinds of skill development that are important for economic mobility; the humanities offer certain kinds of literacy that are indispensable to citizenship; and finally, the humanities offer a critical perspective on values that can actively engage the contemporary metrics by which the humanities themselves are weakened, if not destroyed.⁵⁸

Among others, these *topoi* are themselves wholly obvious. As Butler explicitly notes, the self-evident need to advocate opens a way to a ‘set of propositions and beliefs that we have taken to be true’⁵⁹ and so what we ‘cannot fail to recognize’,⁶⁰ as without need of argument let alone demonstration, a line that goes without saying, prefigures what is to be said, and delimits the unsayable.⁶¹ Noting that the position comes with the risk of being labelled as a

⁵⁸ J Butler ‘Ordinary, incredulous’ in P Brooks (ed) *The Humanities and Public Life* (2014) 27.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid at 16.

conservative, Butler contends that all that is obvious in the name of the humanities amounts to a pressing problem of ideology – the problem of ‘the ethos in which we converge’⁶² and how to trouble our ‘being in the *logos*, meaning in ideology’.⁶³ The obvious and given case for the humanities comes, then, with a difficult ethical task. It demands a critical response, an ‘ethical responsiveness’ to the ‘effective functioning of the ordinary’ terms that rationalise and justify the humanities only by concealing how the humanities begin (again) in a contingent and often violent beginning, and so call – against ‘the loss of communication as the new obvious’⁶⁴ that compels *more* communication – for a recognition of our ‘very basic propositions about speaking and listening’⁶⁵ in the name of a ‘struggle against oblivion’,⁶⁶ a struggle that discloses a responsibility to ‘militate for a sphere of audibility within which to pose our question and have it heard: What now is the value of our values?’⁶⁷

Butler’s position presents an interesting challenge, and perhaps one for which she is not entirely prepared. The task is not to gather and catalogue all the possible arguments for the humanities or work out the decisive case to be made on their behalf. Nor is it to develop yet another advocacy kit, the prefabricated scripts that promise compelling words. Before doing any of this work, as Butler suggests, it is important to consider the ways in which the humanities are argued, that is, how advocacy for the humanities advocates, how it makes audible and legible a case for the humanities in the name of the humanities. There are many such cases, to be sure – and many of them are sure of the goods to which the humanities are pledged and sure that the humanities will make good its promise. And yet one of the most popular and perhaps more powerful cases is one that does not decide, that sets out the humanities as a ‘basket’, a collection of possible goods, all of which and none of which may be actualised. Here and now, the humanities are articulated as an exceptional power, a potential that may or may not come to be, that may or may not become

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid at 22.

⁶⁴ Ibid at 26.

⁶⁵ Ibid at 27.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid at 37.

otherwise. If this case is appealing precisely as it makes it difficult to deny the value of the humanities, not least as there may be nothing specific to deny and as the humanities may not be seen to do anything in particular, the defence of the humanities as potential opens a question of responsibility, a question in which advocacy for the humanities may be called to account for its grounds, the terms of its response-ability.

Speak! Articulate what the humanities do and why they matter. And keep it simple, lest anyone be alienated, or worse, beset with the undue burden of reading a sentence twice. More pragmatism. Perhaps then a nice rendition of the Isocratean claim that the humanities afford the (rhetorical) provision of noble virtues, a way of belonging together that forges the individual and sustains the city. Or perhaps a more Socratic path, along which the humanities afford the experience of truth-seeking, a benevolent scepticism that sheds light on the dilemmas of political life. Or, if these positions seem overly limiting, perhaps something off the more modernist rack, a renaissance-inflected idea that the humanities afford a chance for us to ‘learn to be human’, a promise that may or may not be an ontological claim and one that very likely amounts to a definitive sign of coloniality, a violence perpetuated that remains in waiting, an expression of the humanities that may also be addressed and perhaps one day redressed by the humanities, a potential, assuming a deep-seated philological-philosophical-literary presumption can be turned otherwise.⁶⁸

Character or knowledge? Discovery or discourse? The polling data, if one is inclined to consult such things, has long suggested that these approaches are attractive, enticing and non-threatening, particularly if they are cast into claims such as:

The humanities teach us to think critically and logically with subjective, complex, imperfect information ... they encourage us to think creatively ... and teach us to reason about being human and to ask questions about our world ... and reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense of the world.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ H Arendt, quoted in Harpham (n 15) at 90. On the colonial question, see Ahmed (n 15); W Mignolo *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (2003).

⁶⁹ Terras et al (n 16).

Reasonable questions or questioning reasons? As the National Endowment for the Humanities puts it, the task of ‘promoting excellence in the humanities’⁷⁰ follows from the fact that ‘democracy demands wisdom’⁷¹ in which it is possible to free the mind and cultivate the historical understanding needed to sustain freedom. Unfettered creativity or disciplined productivity? It may be a false choice, or an undecidable one, at least if the contemporary defence of the humanities owes something to Humboldt and Kant, the respective ideas that the state cannot ‘by its own action, bring about the fruitfulness of intellectual activity’⁷² and that the pursuit of higher learning is fundamentally ‘ungovernable’⁷³ even as the tension between the search for truth and the state cannot be resolved any more than it can be allowed to detract from ‘dignity of the government’.⁷⁴ It is an old dilemma, but not without its contemporary currency. As Derrida well explored, the promise of pragmatism is bedevilled by an ‘as if’ that renders its obvious choice undecidable.⁷⁵

Yes, yes, but just choose a line and run with it. The options are plentiful, even if it is not clear that the problem of plenitude has been grasped – do the humanities listen? – or whether it is possible to choose without remainder. Or perhaps more honestly, it is not obvious how advocates seek to invest their obvious positions with power. One standard approach is that the humanities are best defended by appealing to their ‘intrinsic’ value, a set of goods (or virtues) that cannot be pre-determined or reduced to specific outcomes. The humanities matter as such, which means that their advocacy trades in their productive non-utility, along with their capacity to mount and sustain a critique of instrumental reason in the name of imagination, contemplation, self-actualisation and freedom.⁷⁶ The veracity of such promises is often taken to turn

⁷⁰ National Endowment for the Humanities ‘About NEH’, available at <http://www.neh.gov/about>.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² W von Humboldt ‘University reform in Germany’ (1970) 8 *Minerva* 242 at 244.

⁷³ I Kant ‘Conflict of the faculties’ in A Wood (ed) *Religion and Rational Theology* (1996) 260.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ J Derrida ‘The future of the profession or the university without condition (thanks to the “humanities,” what could take place tomorrow)’ in T Cohen (ed) *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader* (2009).

⁷⁶ Kimball (n 38) at 111–12; Butler (n 58) 28.

heavily on the contested question of whether the humanities are able to open, and hold open, the question of becoming human, that is, the ways in which the humanities offer being the chance to actualise its potential humanity or gather the power to trouble the prescriptions of humanism and become otherwise. Here, beautiful souls abound, as do claims to transcend the problems that call the humanities into question. A tradition that holds the capacity to 'transform the heart as well as the mind',⁷⁷ as Drew Faust puts it, seemingly without worry about the ways in which an interest in hearts and minds evokes the aims of American counterinsurgency doctrine, the humanities afford a chance to 'see, compare, reason, and decide'⁷⁸ and gather the capacity for '[i]nterpretation, judgment, and discernment',⁷⁹ all in the name of approaching that *question* of world-making which defies certain reply and troubles the strictures of necessity.⁸⁰ In a slightly more elegant way, and one that recalls the question of *logos*, Biddy Martin holds that the humanities are 'devoted to what we can experience and comprehend – what we can sense, think, understand, appreciate, express, and communicate'.⁸¹ And, she adds, these 'are not skills that can be acquired through training'⁸² so much as they are 'dimensions of character and social life that require a sensual and playful relation to language and thought'.⁸³

As a lightly guided entrée into the possibilities of creative autonomy, the intrinsic case for the humanities promises an open way of life. Its familiar counterpart is an 'extrinsic' account of how the humanities support and sustain one or more forms of life. In its most straightforward versions, this case figures the humanities as a means to any number of ends, including a productive career, vibrant and diverse culture, citizenship, democratic politics and

⁷⁷ D Faust 'See, compare, reason, decide' (2014) March–April *Harvard Magazine*, available at harvardmagazine.com/2014/03/see-compare-reason-decide. See also Ong (n 13) at 617–40. For somewhat more public-facing versions of the argument, see Connolly (n 17); West & Tate (n 27).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ C Martin 'On the question of value' in C Martin, GP Lepage & M Mostafavi (eds) *Do the Humanities Have to be Useful?* (2006) 93.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

economic prosperity.⁸⁴ To follow the path of the humanities is to approach, if not achieve, something that exceeds the sum of its parts, something that it cannot fully contain and which may appear as theoretical insight, political engagement or normative guidance. In practical terms, this often means that the humanities are defined and defended as being for the public. And, as a 'public good', the humanities are held to advance the interests of collective life and address the problems of the commons, its 'unity in difference' and its means of exchange, whether in the form of sovereign power, rule of law, cultural play, economic distribution or political deliberation. Struggle, it should be noted, does not usually make the list. As Harpham contends, in a way that endeavours to soften the instrumental edge, one goal of the humanities is 'not the acquisition of a skill or set of facts, but rather the fostering of the experience of intellectual and evaluative freedom that can support the formation of democratic citizenry capable of self-directed innovation and adaptation'.⁸⁵ The lines here are all quite fine. Against vocationalism and committed to relevance, the ascribed utility of the humanities is conditioned on an ability to question, assess and perhaps reimagine use-value.⁸⁶

Again, this is obvious – the faithful and the feckless well know something of the intrinsic and extrinsic cases for the humanities. And many understand how much time and energy is devoted to demarcating, debating, blurring and policing the line between the two cases. At times, recalling CP Snow, it is as if the humanities themselves are wracked by the problem of two cultures, with ideal-aesthetic visions on one side and utilitarian-instrumental orders on the other. Now and then, usually under the safe cover of mandatory strategic planning or a humanities centre initiative, there is a bit of tarrying over the difference between inspiring creativity and producing know-how. It is an ancient and familiar debate. Open-ended input or directed output? *Critical*

⁸⁴ For the case without reserve, see Deloitte Access Economics 'The value of the humanities' (2018), available at <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Economics/deloitte-au-economics-value-humanities-111018.pdf>.

⁸⁵ GG Harpham 'From eternity to here: Shrinkage in American thinking about higher education' (2011) 116 *Representations* 42 at 55.

⁸⁶ Among others, see Martin (n 81).

thinking in the name of discovery or critical *thinking* that pays dividends?⁸⁷

If there are principled arguments on ‘both sides’, there are also more than a few fundamentalists – thou shalt not sully the humanities with worldly tasks *or* thou shalt not let the humanities remain idle. The clash exposes that the intrinsic case can be vulnerable to the charge that it disavows the world which it seeks to make. Much like the pacifist who walks into the middle of a bar fight (after having mistaken the bar for a library) and pleads for everyone to ‘just get along’, proponents of the intrinsic case may well offer an argument that either ignores the question of its audience or leads those to whom it is addressed to wonder after the presumption of a position that *demands* creativity and does so in a way that enacts little if anything of what it defends. For its part, the extrinsic case may stumble precisely as its display of worldly relevance comes at the cost of its own soul. Eager to cater, extrinsic approaches show an affinity for reactive ‘three-point plans’, a varying set of strategic visions that advance the public good by depleting public opinion of its relevance and instrumental agendas that dislocate the autonomy of the humanities in the name of assuming the very forms of power that they claim to critique.⁸⁸

All hands on deck! Perhaps so – as it is just as difficult to sustain the productive uselessness of a humanities wed to the legacy of humanism as it is to defend the capacity of the humanities to instil a set of public goods that may or may not be public. The difficulties compound as the intrinsic and extrinsic cases each take something from both sides of the traditional justifications for the liberal arts, the education reserved for the ‘free’ and the ‘open’ path that leads to all manner of freedom. Thus, as one listens to the different cases, it is the line between intrinsic and extrinsic that has been increasingly and perhaps now thoroughly blurred into a sort of ‘mixed’ case for the humanities, a rationalising argument that endeavours to link if not synthesise intrinsic and extrinsic approaches and which may then reflect a pragmatism that forecloses no option in the hope of

⁸⁷ See, for instance, Franke (n 28) at 13–23; E Belfiore “‘Impact’, ‘value’ and ‘bad economics’: Making sense of the problem of value in the arts and humanities’ (2015) 14 *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 95.

⁸⁸ For a staggering critique, see C Lorenz ‘If you’re so smart, why are you under surveillance? Universities, neoliberalism, and new public management’ (2012) 38 *Critical Inquiry* 599.

resolving controversy and securing legitimacy. Among a number of others, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (AAAS) relied heavily on this compound approach in its much-discussed 2013 report, 'The Heart of the Matter'.⁸⁹ If the title invokes Humboldt, the larger and somewhat triumphalist argument offers a mixed case for the humanities, including the mixture of the humanities with the social sciences. Echoing something of Veblen's concern for what happens when 'business proficiency' is put in the place of learning and renewing the 1947 Truman report's egalitarian view of higher education as the key to 'a more abundant personal life and a stronger, freer social order'⁹⁰ the report's movement is worth tracing:

The humanities—including the study of languages, literature, history, jurisprudence, philosophy, comparative religion, ethics, and the arts—are disciplines of memory and imagination, telling us where we have been and helping us envision where we are going Together [with the social sciences], they provide an intellectual framework and context for understanding and thriving in a changing world, and they connect us with our global community. When we study these subjects, we learn not only *what* but *how* and *why*. The humanities and social sciences teach us to question, analyze, debate, evaluate, interpret, synthesize, compare evidence, and communicate—skills that are critically important in shaping adults who can become independent thinkers Our distinguished tradition of broad education—drawing on the humanities and social and natural sciences, and promoting connections between them—has stimulated and nurtured America's extraordinary record of literary, artistic, political, scientific, industrial, and technological innovation. These achievements were fostered through a series of strategic decisions stretching over two centuries As citizens, we need to absorb an ever-growing body of information and to assess the sources of that information. As workers, we need to adapt to an ever-accelerating rate of technological change and to reflect on the implications of these changes. As members of a global community, we need to look beyond our borders to communicate and interact with individuals from societies and cultures different from our own. As a nation, we need to provide an educational foundation for our future stability and prosperity—drawing on all areas of knowledge.⁹¹

⁸⁹ AAAS *The Heart of the Matter* (n 16).

⁹⁰ See Harpham (n 85) at 45, 54.

⁹¹ AAAS *The Heart of the Matter* (n 16) 17–18.

As it draws from and mixes intrinsic and extrinsic cases, the AAAS position enacts what has been aptly named a ‘basket justification’ or ‘basket approach’ to the defence of the humanities, a tack that often endeavours to finesse the tension at the heart of the liberal arts and trades in interlocking appeals for conceptual, scholarly, pedagogical, cultural and political unity in diversity.⁹²

The basket comes in any number of shapes and sizes. Some are flimsy while others are built for the long haul. A few are elegant – and widely imitated with more and often much less care. Well stocked, portable and properly balanced – the wine should not be set on top of the flowers – a good basket is thought to hold and express the compound value of the humanities, both in itself and for others. So contained, and as elements of the basket slip in and out of view, the humanities are presented as historically conditioned and a condition of understanding (their) history. They are field-bound modes of open inquiry and composed of both contingent imagination and disciplined decision-making. In the name of the humanities, the basket holds being’s uninterested creativity and its strategic interest in economic, political and cultural well-being; a collective cause of the cause that they serve and a cause that serves the common cause, the humanities prosper in the name of prosperity and constitute a public good that sustains a good public.

The humanities basket is an idea, inquiry, pedagogy, discourse, institution and more – all at once, a justification for what is more than one thing at a time. So what exactly is what? A fair question. The basket, at base, is an expression and articulation of potential, the potentiality of the humanities. To wit, a recent white paper from the Humanities and Liberal Arts Assessment Project, an initiative led by Danielle Allen. Holding that ‘the humanities are best understood as an assemblage of craft practices handed down from master to apprentice over millennia’,⁹³ the study contends that there are ‘four basic human potentialities that must be activated to achieve the humanistic baseline’⁹⁴ and claims that these potentialities are:

⁹² Kimball (n 38) 195–6.

⁹³ Humanities and Liberal Arts Assessment Project *Understanding the Contributions of the Humanities to Human Development: A Methodological White Paper* (2016) 13.

⁹⁴ *Ibid* at 10.

to prepare ourselves for non-exploitive bread-winning work, to prepare ourselves for civic and political engagement, to prepare ourselves for creative self-expression and world-making, and to prepare ourselves for rewarding relationships in spaces of intimacy and leisure.⁹⁵

This is a typical contention. In the very basket that it likely assembles, the humanities gather and hold their intrinsic and extrinsic goods, all of which have been and all of which are yet to come. Here and now, these goods that define and justify the humanities exist as potential. They are *dunamis*, recalling the ancient Greek, a kind of power that neither develops by chance nor operates by necessity, but which abides in what is ‘in the main contingent’, in what resists completion (analytic resolution) and remains capable of becoming otherwise.⁹⁶ Potentiality is that power to both be *and* not be, at once. It is that power which has been and remains yet to come, a movement of uncertain becoming and a struggle of beginning anew.⁹⁷ With one hand, potentiality holds out promise and hope, the beautiful soul to come. With the other, it holds deferral and delay, a break in progress and sometimes the endless waiting of bad infinity.

For all the appeal of its expansive potential, the basket makes a case for the humanities that likely confounds their definition and certainly complicates their justification. Set out in the past and future perfect tense, the basket’s contents may or may not be present – here and now. They may move from inside to outside and back again, showing forth, escaping and disappearing into the confines of the basket. As potentiality, the humanities seem to be near everything and nearly everywhere, except on the pain of humanity-denying contradiction. They are a promise of more than one good at a time and perhaps more than seems possible at any given time. Yet, it is never quite clear what is involved in making good on this promise. In the same breath, the humanities are a humble if not meagre offering, a historical foundation that cannot be transcended, a set of goods yet to arrive, and a decisive

⁹⁵ Ibid at 11.

⁹⁶ As Allen well knows, this is a reference to Aristotle’s claim as to the concern of rhetoric, that which is ‘in the main contingent’.

⁹⁷ G Agamben ‘On potentiality’ in D Heller-Roazen (ed) *Potentialities* (1999) 177–84.

commitment to an open future. As the humanities are articulated as potentiality, recalling Butler's account, the obvious goods that are obviously good about the humanities are simultaneously taken for granted – here and now – and rendered strange – yet to come. The value of their value is that their virtue is neither here nor there. Thus, in their potentiality, the humanities are rendered and presented as exceptional. Moving back and forth, difficult to pin down but also impossible to deny, they upset the stability of the good that they embody – as good; they codify norms from which they deviate – in the name of the norm; they enable a freedom that they both presuppose and dissolve – for freedom; they are a mode of engagement that retreats into itself, for others, and an opening to thought that forecloses thinking, with certainty. All of this exceptional potential. So much potential, the power of potentiality, a-tisket, a-tasket, what is happening inside, outside, and all around the humanities basket?

III A GOOD DAY AT THE CARNIVAL – OR, RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION IN THE MIDST OF EXPERIENCE WITHOUT WONDER

There is much to do, so do wander around and discover the attractions that appeal. Perhaps you will find something that makes you feel young again but do enjoy it all responsibly – and please do not complain about the disappointments, as it makes one look small and nobody wants to be sent to the parking lot to sulk in the car. So too the humanities, stocked with goods, all ready to provide a good time, in good time. And yet much like the carnival's enticements, it is difficult to say much about the precise nature of this promise, a basket in hand and one on which we wait with a rather too practised smile.

It is difficult to say – perhaps this itself is the hinge. In its most complex and likely most elegant form, the humanities basket holds and expresses the value of the humanities as potentiality, a variegated power of becoming, a capacity to (not) be and to (not) become otherwise, seemingly without strict concern for identity and contradiction. The humanities are an intrinsic good and an instrumental means to more or less utilitarian ends? Fine! They are exclusive and open? Great! They conserve and break conceptions of the human? The more! The humanities are given by nature,

tradition and faith *and* they are fleeting, fractured and not yet arrived? The merrier! All of it, of origins and for beginnings, both in the name of cultivating youth (*paideia*) and fostering that spirit of natality which embodies, troubles and remakes the human condition, all of it and more, into the basket, this vessel into which the ‘humanities’ mix and match.

The basket is a defining metaphor to be sure, but also a larger trope, not just a gathering of the goods that justify the humanities but a way of turning these goods toward and perhaps even into one another. With and within its basket, the humanities hold, create and cultivate potential. Holding the potential for unity in difference *and* difference in unity, the basket is an attempt to articulate the power at work in the humanities. It is then a double response to the criticism that the humanities do not and perhaps cannot say what they do. Want to know what is at work and what is at play in the humanities? Well, take a closer look into the proverbial basket – it is there to be seen and indeed it is obvious! Except, of course, that the longer one looks the less obvious things appear, as intrinsic goods give way to instrumental gains and back again, without an account of how this movement happens and what it might mean, not least for understanding the exceptional contribution that the humanities might make to defining and understanding the ‘value of our values’. At any given moment, which may or may not be the present moment, the basket that expresses the humanities as potentiality may shapeshift, change size, overflow or stay empty, and it may do all of this at once, without apparent reason, and in such a manner that points to and may indeed beg the second question that confronts the humanities and compels advocacy in their name: do the humanities actually do what they say they are doing?

So appears the very old and fully fraught question of responsibility, a question that brought Socrates before the law, to the steps of the courthouse and an unexpected discussion with his friend Euthyphro, as to what it means and who can say what it means to utter words of responsibility, responsibly. That the conversation concludes without a definitive answer is, of course, decisive, and perhaps the very opening to the humanities that, as Kant heard them, speak to piety and remain ever close to heresy, a tension that Derrida famously and carefully detailed in the modern university, an institution founded on a ‘pledge of responsibility’ that sets the

humanities to struggle with its most basic ‘act of professing’ – what can be spoken about, on whose behalf, and with what force, in the name of freedom that may defy assertion and proscribe its prescription?

‘To profess’, in the humanities, for the humanities, as Derrida puts it, ‘is to make a pledge while committing one’s responsibility.’⁹⁸ It is then a promise that speaks with hesitation to contingency, the being (not) yet to come, the potential from which, in which and out of which the humanities are responsible. And yet, in a way that Derrida sets to the side (or takes exception), this difficult utterance of value may itself turn not just on the status – the felicity – of the speech act but also on the experience of contingent speech, an experience in which the capacity to speak is not a given such that the potential for responsibility is disclosed and grasped as a question of response-ability, a question of the power to respond in so many words that might be otherwise.

All together now, in the name of the humanities: responsible words! Consider the terms of a much-discussed and widely imitated 2013 Harvard report, ‘The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future’.⁹⁹ The product of a working group led by faculty in English and Philosophy, the report is both an assessment of the institutional health of the ‘humanities project’ (especially with respect to undergraduate education) and a basket-based defence of its value. The basket takes initial form with a potted history, one that recalls antiquity’s trivium and quadrivium and loosely links them to the renaissance humanism from which emerges the *studia humanitas*, a tradition, according to the report, that ‘transcends the moment of its origin’¹⁰⁰ and shaped modern humanism and its scholarly counterpart, the humanities. Though cryptic and somewhat perplexing given the report’s full embrace of philology, this extra-historical development proves

⁹⁸ Derrida (n 75) 35. Also addressed to the question of responsibility, see J Derrida ‘Mochlos or the conflict of the faculties’ in R Rand (ed) *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties* (1992) at 3–34.

⁹⁹ Harvard University *The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future* (2013), available at https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/jamessimpson/files/mapping_the_future.pdf. On the launch of the report, see C Ireland ‘Mapping the future’ *Harvard Gazette* 6 June 2013, available at <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2013/06/mapping-the-future/>.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid at 12.

crucial soon enough, not least as the report contends that the humanities' 'Western genealogy ... points to an ongoing dynamic, triple tension'¹⁰¹ that runs through and across the disciplines which make up the humanities:

History bequeaths us traditions of the Humanities as (i) disinterested, critical scholarship designed to uncover historical truth; (ii) the instructor of technical, applicable skills; and (iii) as the promotor of enlightened, engaged civic action that trains students constructively to understand their own humanity and that of others. In each of these functions, the Humanities, like all the Liberal Arts, proclaim their liberal status, freed from the immediate pressure of economic survival, from the pressures of vested interests in the production of knowledge, and from ideological or religious pre-judgment. Of course, the Humanities look to the world beyond the academy, which, apart from anything else, makes them possible. Of course the liberal disciplines emphasize the transferrable skills of a liberal education (notably cogent, critical thought and persuasive powers of speaking and writing). Of course, our study is motivated one way or another by the needs of now. But a liberal education is not *determined* by these pressures: it stands back from, and adjacent to those pressures; reaches deeper. And looks for and from a longer, more disinterested perspective.¹⁰²

A complex mix, this mixed case – a basket filled with elements that do not mingle easily, a tension that the report concedes is not easy to explain let alone resolve, but which struggles against an increasingly loud 'philistine objection'¹⁰³ to the humanities and declining enrolments that reflect a pervasive 'lack of public comprehension of their practice'.¹⁰⁴ Translated? The humanities are beset with poorly formed words, besieged by uninformed expression and confounded by disinformation.

In the dwindling light, the report calls for a 'more precise account of how the Humanities are currently practiced'¹⁰⁵ and answers this call with an extended reflection on what it holds out as the 'four models' or 'ideal types' to which teaching and learning in the humanities conform: '(i) skeptical, detached critique;

¹⁰¹ Ibid at 15.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid at 29.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid at 16.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

(ii) appreciative but disinterested enjoyment; (iii) enthusiastic identification and engagement; and (iv) artistic making.¹⁰⁶ Notice the math here: a trivium, the three inherited traditions – truth-seeking, technical skills acquisition, and the promotion of civic life – that are held to compose the ‘triple tension’, which inheres in the humanities, is set with a quadrivium, four modes of inquiry that are held to characterise if not define the humanities. The report offers neither historical nor conceptual explanation of the relation between this three-fold of purposes and four-fold of inquiry, an ambiguity that deepens as the report subtracts two-thirds of the trivium and all but erases the fourth element of the quadrivium; that is, the report sets aside skills acquisition and civic life to focus almost exclusively on truth-seeking *and* it severs the ‘applied’ and ‘practical tradition’ of ‘artistic making’ from its ‘scholarly’ counterparts – indeed, the report does not keep its own promise to return to what it calls the ‘artistic’ facets of the humanities.¹⁰⁷ What remains is deemed ‘immensely precious’, the ‘scholarly positions’ that are defined by and trade in detached philological critique, disinterested aesthetic appreciation and unifying romantic identification, and which constitute a ‘double-edged sword’, a tool that can be the ‘scourge of a culture or its greatest hope’.¹⁰⁸

As they are directed by the report to the ‘sources of value’ (akin to, but somewhat less sophisticated than Butler’s account of the humanities as inquiry in the ‘value of our values’), the humanities are claimed to hold and express a ‘constant tension’, a tension that abides within the ‘triple tension’ of proper humanities-based inquiry and one that must be ‘cultivated, nurtured, and sustained’ as the humanities work ‘between the necessary stability that our current understanding offers and the renewal of our self-understanding that its current inadequacies seem to demand’.¹⁰⁹ As it is ‘embedded in history’¹¹⁰ relevant to a ‘free democratic society’¹¹¹ and ‘freed from the immediate pressure of economic survival, from the pressures of vested interests in the production

¹⁰⁶ Ibid at 15–16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid at 13, 16.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid at 27.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid at 24.

¹¹⁰ Ibid at 47.

¹¹¹ Ibid at 23.

of knowledge and from ideological or religious pre-judgment',¹¹² a 'true education in the humanities' unfolds in the ambiguity composed by 'a sensitive relation to our own history'¹¹³ and a 'hopeful aspiration to a better future'.¹¹⁴ Altogether, and crucially then:

Both dangerous and at the same time potentially liberating or redemptive, the humanities can help to clarify one's sense of purpose or to undermine it, can help to identify possibilities for greatness in culture or can artfully destabilize an existing world. An understanding of the power of the humanistic enterprise, therefore, and an understanding of how responsibly to engage it and employ it, should be central aims of any education in the humanities.¹¹⁵

Responsibly. Indeed, responsibility is the keynote here – and the running thread. In its education given variously to 'critique, appreciation, and engagement', the humanities, as the report would have it, circle and shed their light on the question: 'By what mechanism does a responsible change in culture mores occur?'¹¹⁶ Addressed to 'constant tension' between stability and renewal and working within the 'triple tension' of their own inquiry, the humanities are tasked to maintain, if not turn, this 'constant tension' into a 'productive tension', an undefined balance between preserving a stable foundation and opening opportunities for unhinged innovation that is 'crucial to any culture worthy of its name'¹¹⁷ and which calls on the humanities to serve as a responsible mechanism for change, even as the tools of humanistic inquiry are themselves subject to the question of how they rest on and move between an interest in conservation and the desire to begin again.

Responsibility or bust. Or, more precisely, responsibility or the wrong path, the misguided way of the 'Sophists of fifth century Athens'.¹¹⁸ Of this, the report is sure, offering as its proof a rather belaboured and somewhat overdetermined reading of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a tale held to demonstrate the 'potentially dangerous and corrosive aspect of the humanities',¹¹⁹ a form of

¹¹² Ibid at 15.

¹¹³ Ibid at 26.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid at 27.

¹¹⁶ Ibid at 25.

¹¹⁷ Ibid at 24.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

inquiry and way of life defined by the temptation to rhetoric and its wholly irresponsible desire ‘to make the weaker argument defeat the stronger’.¹²⁰ This turn is altogether telling, in several interlocking senses.

First, the report’s rendering of rhetoric mimics the very cultural presumption that it claims must be put to question. While it concedes that its critique of its own caricature of sophism may be ‘deeply conservative’ and so naïve to the tension to which the humanities are called, the report is clear if not adamant that rhetoric has no place in this work, that rhetoric is not a way to answer and is in no way an answer to the most basic question posed and pursued by the humanities: ‘By what mechanism does a responsible change in culture mores occur?’¹²¹ That ‘there must be something,’ as the report puts it, ‘on the basis of which we advocate for some changes over others’,¹²² is taken to be true for the humanities themselves, as the report’s reductive (recall the math) historical-genealogy is figured as the basis on which the humanities themselves can properly speak, a form of expression that by the report’s calculus is wholly non-rhetorical and which distinguishes the well-spoken humanities from the ‘philistines’ that chatter ill-informed objections to their work. Indeed, in a sort of reprise of the decision to reduce the Boylston Chair to so much kindling, the Harvard report limits rhetoric to ‘technical training in the arts of *logos* broadly understood’¹²³ and then confines it to those ‘disciplinary skills/transferrable skills’ that it explicitly divorces from the ‘scholarly’ concerns of the humanities, the philological, aesthetic and romantic inquiry deemed necessary to find a ‘critical, corrective voice’, liberate oneself from practical interest, and undertake the ‘building new forms of community’.¹²⁴ For rhetoric, there is little to say and less to be said. It is an altogether lesser enterprise, one whose scope is limited to the

¹²⁰ Ibid at 25.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid at 24.

¹²³ Ibid at 49.

¹²⁴ Ibid at 20. See also the instructive, but rather too self-important, J Heinrichs ‘How Harvard destroyed rhetoric’ (1995) July–August *Harvard Magazine*, available at https://www.harvardmagazine.com/sites/default/files/how_harvard_destroyed_rhetoric.pdf.

production of ‘transferrable competences’¹²⁵ and the discussion of which is relegated to two-thirds of the report’s final page.

Once paired with the obligatory refusal of a bad reading of Hegel – spirit will show no teleology! – the report’s clichéd fear of a rhetorical planet is precisely that – cliché. It is a banal imitation-repetition of the longstanding misunderstanding (what is it?) and deep-seated distrust (what does it do?) of rhetoric, an assumption that is itself built into culture’s ordinary language and which the report’s vision of humanities-based inquiry legitimises without question in the name of a culture that is nevertheless deemed healthy only as its foundations are held open to question. In fact, an early draft of the report seems to acknowledge this very problem, the danger of a humanities that overlooks the ambiguous power of language and remains certain of its own capacity for proper expression. If, as the draft puts it, ‘the aspiration to ground a sense of identity for a people can only exist fruitfully when it is in constant tension with the aspiration to discover anew what that identity is’,¹²⁶ the final report holds this to be true, save for language – the difference between proper expression and rhetorical hooliganism.¹²⁷ Some tensions, apparently, are not worth investigating or maintaining, and some double-edged instruments are dull – or a way of playing both sides off the middle.

Secondly, the Harvard report rigs its own language game, perhaps at the cost of presupposing precisely what it claims to hold open for question. To be clear, the concern is not whether this or that vision of rhetoric, whether as idea, theory or discipline, must have some defining place in the humanities. And never mind, for now, that this report is a case, that the report’s argument is argued, a set of rhetorical arguments that are not self-legitimising. More interesting is that the report’s displacement of rhetoric from the humanities marks a conceptual-critical and indeed ethical decision. If, from its first to last word, the report endows the humanities with the responsibility of investigating the ‘fundamental sources

¹²⁵ Ibid at 45.

¹²⁶ Draft copy at 25. The draft is undated and marked ‘For limited circulation only’. It can be found here: https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/sdkelly/files/mapping_the_future_12_april_2013.pdf.

¹²⁷ Harvard University (n 99).

of value'¹²⁸ and serving as a responsible mechanism for cultural change, it does so without any consideration whatsoever of the altogether rhetorical question of how the humanities themselves define, underwrite, reify and trouble the power of responsibility, the contingent capacity, the (im)potential to gather words in the name of making and expressing a response. At no point does the report consider the implications of its discounting of rhetoric for its own explicit commitment to responsibility, its contention that the proper (non-rhetorical) humanities express their power by bringing culture's 'most fundamental commitments into question' and inquiring into the better and worse ways that a 'responsible change in cultural mores' can occur.¹²⁹ Set firmly against the misinformed objectives of the philistines, the report's anti-vocational vocation is curious precisely in that it does not simply bracket, but forgets, the question of response – as a question. Taking its stand in the face of what it deems sophistic corruption, the humanities counter the weaker case's so-called masquerade with a constellation of forces, its modes of proper inquiry, all of which presuppose and seek to spread the good and given word:

Each tradition [philological critique; disinterested aesthetic enjoyment; romantic identification] will also have its characteristic enemy: the philological, historicist sceptic will target the linguistically incompetent and the presentist; disinterested aesthetic appreciation will repudiate the philistine; and the enthusiast will be on the lookout for the bigot or the antiquarian.¹³⁰

This might be trite if it was not the very warp and weft of the humanities basket: a demand for responsibility on the basis of a *certain* response-ability. On the Harvard report's account, the inquiry that drives the humanities proceeds with no doubt that language is available, intact and at the ready for use, a given capacity with which to 'target' those outside its fold, 'repudiate' those who might hold it otherwise, and surveil those who might use it improperly. Notice though how this prefigured and rather righteous response relies on the instrumentalism that it attributes to the sophistic impulse of which it claims to want no part.

¹²⁸ Ibid at 24.

¹²⁹ Ibid at 25.

¹³⁰ Ibid at 21.

Consider how the case holds its tongue as to how its battle for ‘historical truth’ and ‘enlightened, engaged civic action’¹³¹ follows from, and indeed depends on, its own attribution of barbarism, the attribution of being at a loss for language, with poor habits of expression, and caught in the wrong words. In doing so, recalling Butler, the obvious responsibility to which the humanities are given slides seamlessly into an obliviousness, a forgetting of the *question* of response-ability on which its announced aims rest. Put differently, the so-called responsible questioning of culture is the questioning in which there is no question of not having words; no question of not being able to communicate with others who already share a facility and interest for interaction, opposition and debate; no question of not experiencing being at a loss for words as anything but a deficit to be redressed by remedial training; no question of ever doubting that civic engagement comes pre-installed with a normatively secure account of what it means to engage.

All told, the ability to respond, the capacity and power to make coherent and meaningful response, is beyond doubt. It is not potentiality but held to be fully actual, with suggestions to the contrary being not only unthinkable (one searches the Harvard report in vain for evidence of any wonder with respect to language beyond the given philological method), but the very definition of irresponsibility, an undue concession to the rhetorical that is held to be, at best, a distraction from real thinking, and more likely a victory for the worse case. And yet, it is the question of response-ability on which this very promise of a responsible humanities turns, at least as its inquiry is addressed to what remains a double rhetorical question of speaking, acting and judging in the midst of culture, politics and ethics. This is the report’s tedious irony. The word’s vocation is simply dismissed, sent off for a second-tier vocational intervention, a process of instrumental acquisition. The report professes that the humanities need live on a knife’s edge, the ‘productive tension’ in which value is responsibly constitutive and constituted in *logos*, but rules out any experience of this tension, of language which is not already assumed and mastered, an experience of the word’s irresponsibility and, more pressing, its response-ability as potentiality, as potential and impotential in the same

¹³¹ Ibid at 15.

breath, movement, flux, contingency that defies strict possession, a *logos* that holds its power not as presence but as inquiry.

The Harvard report is a fine and indeed influential example of the basket case for the humanities, a case honed very well by philosophical and literary interests that, with a bit of help from conservative friends in linguistics, prefers to name and speak for the responsibility of the humanities detached from responsibility, against the experience of language as a question. With this stance, the report has significant company. Indeed, there are many cases like it: so many advocacy toolkits, all willing and often eager to advocate for the humanities in a way that evades the rhetorical questions at hand.¹³² And the star of this carnival's variety show? Today there is little doubt who has top billing – *gentle audience, we give you, engagement!* Indeed, with the robust turn to engagement, advocates have found their cake, an idea with which to refashion the basket (new box, same great taste!) and so re-present and defend the value of the humanities – for everyone's eating. With the humanities, there will be civic engagement, democratic engagement, interdisciplinary engagement, public engagement and so much more. Students will step off campus in order to engage, a gesture that will surely impress accrediting agencies and mollify hostile legislatures. Enticed by dedicated grant money, research will emerge from its silos and engage with other research, an engagement that will then be published in an engaging book series.¹³³ Let there be bowling alone no more!

And yet, as engagement has pushed back the walls of the basket, as promise has been heaped on promise, it has become altogether apparent how little attention is paid to the question of what it is to engage, that is, what is needed to foster, perform and sustain engagement, and what makes for better and worse forms

¹³² One readily finds more of the same, perhaps not least in the myriad 'humanities advocacy' toolkits created to support, all of which take themselves for granted. For instance, National Humanities Alliance *Study the Humanities-Toolkit*, available at <https://www.studythehumanities.org/toolkit?>; National Humanities Alliance *Guide to Virtual Advocacy*, available at https://assets.nationbuilder.com/nhalliance/pages/1748/attachments/original/1645198063/ADVOCACY_GUIDE_2022_v2.pdf?1645198063.

¹³³ For a dizzying set of examples and an instructive view, see Humanities for All *Humanities for All: Over 2,000 Projects Nationwide*, available at <https://humanitiesforall.org/>.

of engagement. For some, such concerns are simply category mistakes – one is engaged as one engages. For others, echoing the logic of the Harvard report, they are too risky. However it is cast, the dismissal rather conspicuously ignores all of the bewildered undergraduates who are shuttled off campus without any clue as to what they might say to those with whom they have been assigned to ‘engage’. It also overlooks how very often the humanities sponsor engagements that manage only to gather like with like, without evident concern for how to support interaction between those who are increasingly disinclined to trust let alone hear one another. As with the call for a responsible humanities that begs its own rhetorical assumptions, the promise of the good engagement is safe work, a humanities without fear of not knowing what to say ahead of time and whose promise is often limited to serial forms of unidirectional expression – tell a story or provide skills *to*, record *this*, archive *that*, document *them*. All perhaps useful in their moment, but all self-justifying, a way to tout the humanities without bothering anyone, without listening to what has been deemed unfit to say, without experiencing being at a loss for words.

IV AFTER THE MIDWAY – OR, THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF PROMISING WORDS

Perhaps it was simply what it was, a day of riding the twee rollercoaster, hearing more calliope music than recommended, and winning a four-foot-tall stuffed dog that makes the evening’s drive home too cramped for conversation, not least for any musing about the carnival’s inner workings, the nature of the machine that choreographs movement of metal and bodies and light for a proper measure of fun. By morning, the question is boring, which means that there is little to say in the aftermath. It was an experience – an experience had, though for reasons that are not quite clear, but which do not really need to be sorted out. Been there – consumed that – back to it. Just as it very much seems to go with the work of advocating for the humanities. Walter Benjamin understood this precisely, in a way that should not be forgotten: ‘In our struggle for responsibility, we battle someone who is masked. The mask of the adult is called “experience”’.¹³⁴ Writing this as a university

¹³⁴ W Benjamin *Early Writings (1910–1917)* translated by H Eiland (2011) 116.

student, Benjamin grasped that the philistine is not necessarily off-campus – smug with the self-Confirming form of experience (*erleben*) that remains blind to the ‘great and meaningful’, the adult standing in front of us ‘smiles in a superior fashion’ and ‘in advance he devalues the years we will live’.¹³⁵ All of this, to the letter, a searing indictment of the humanities that profess to comprehend responsibility without the experience (*erfahrung*) of responsibility, without the word necessarily in hand, for the taking, held as one’s own and at the ready to do one’s bidding.

And it is very much a matter of ‘comprehension’, a concept rife and riddled with the language of possession, containment and seizure, whether by hands or with words – or words in hand (*comprehensio*, with its roots in the Greek, *katalepsis*). The word is comprehended. No question. It is given and secure ground, all the more so for plausible deniability in the event that expression on behalf of the humanities fails to succeed or goes awry – *the crisis is not and cannot be our responsibility!* As a basket and in a basket, the word is held in the name of limitless potential – *yes, that for which the responsible humanities are responsible!* – a claimed power that goes to exceptional lengths to disavow its own contingency, the decisive (im)potential of its promise. And indeed – *no such irresponsible talk!* – this silence extends, it must extend, to the question of responsibility, a question deemed and held to be incomprehensible, precisely as it is heard to open the gates to the barbarians and so risk being overrun by lesser words, the ‘rhetorical’ weakness that would debase the sacred strength of the *homologēō*. If rationalised on the grounds of a comedy, this pious defence of the city may well set us on tragedy’s stage, caught in the scene of recognition, the moment of dawning comprehension as to what has been miscomprehended and what then remains incomprehensible and so not for the taking, the word that cannot be assumed except as the onset of stasis, a violence in which life renders itself hostile to itself.

The point is not to re-install rhetoric to some former and likely mythical glory, whether as queen of the liberal arts or the touchstone of democratic life – the vast miscomprehension of the concept, not least by way of a contemporary press that fears the implications of the ‘rhetorical’ far more than the jackboot, forecloses any such reversal. It is rather to struggle a bit, to struggle with what cannot

¹³⁵ Ibid at 116–17.

be grasped and contained, and so to comprehend something of the experience of advocating for the humanities as what remains and what does well to remain incomprehensible. Perhaps, by way of conclusion, this might include reflecting on how calls to advocate for the humanities are often oblivious to the conditions of such advocacy – the humanities become partially self-intelligible in what they miscomprehend and deem incomprehensible. But well beyond such relatively banal oversight, not seeing as a form of control, the experience in question – and not the experience at hand! – may be one of coming to voice at a loss for words and so speaking for the humanities as a *question* of language, a question that interrupts advocacy and brings to the humanities squarely the problem of what they claim to value.

Under the banner of necessity and the non-threatening veil of communication, the call to advocate for the humanities is an imperial project launched with a smiling face. There is no consideration of advocacy's referent, what might be included and excluded from the humanities – it is the humanities all and the humanities for all, particularly as the articulated need for advocacy shows no concern for what might count as a legitimate criticism of the humanities; or, to lower the bar, what might amount to an interesting contention, perhaps a claim that troubles the ways and means of defending and preserving the humanities. Such suggestions are presumptively suspect, as they arrive from those on the outside who are written off as unable to understand, who by virtue of being on the outside cannot comprehend the humanities, even as they are deemed capable (and culpable) of inducing its crisis – that so much vitriol and anti-intellectual garbage are tossed at the humanities does not quite explain this, the perennial but somehow also accidental attack.

So the humanities are largely pre-comprehended, as are the grounds and terms of the advocacy mobilised in their defence. More often than not, it seems that there are only disincentives to ask after the conditions under which it is possible to speak for the humanities. And, as it risks 'rhetoric', there is certainly little cause to reflect on the work of advocacy in relation to the history of the humanities themselves, the historical project that supposedly *warrants* advocacy, and which is defined and carried by a question of language, the humanities as a question of language, the difficult power of *logos* as the question of the humanities,

the question that inspires the lower faculty and which only the lower faculty may be able to ask. No cause – because advocacy is pre-comprehended as what is necessary in the face of crisis, the ripple that threatens to tear it all down, even as it does not apparently threaten the grounds, terms and dynamics of the communication that will keep it all together. Never mind that this appeal to crisis mis-comprehends and so mis-takes crisis, what throws language to question. In the demand to advocate for the humanities, one does not have to wait long to hear the exchange between Echo and Narcissus – again.

Advocacy is good and it is needed, though there is no apparent need (or only *apparent* need) to theorise the conditions of speaking for and defending the humanities. The *theōrós* is a threat, the figure of theory that leaves the shared meaning of the city and risks becoming unrecognisable, without the words that bring recognition. This aversion is both surprising and not. It is the norm for philosophy still addicted to contingency-defying (or converting, really) ‘logic’ and the literary studies endlessly enamoured with its ever capacious and dewy-eyed faith in the miracle of the ‘novel’. And yet, it is altogether startling once things get going and one begins to hear the gathering cases for the humanities, the baskets filled to the brim with language promises and overflowing with the promise of language. With the humanities in hand, there will be expression to provoke the imagination and invigorate culture; free and open exchanges of informed opinion that will enliven civic deliberation, energise democratic politics and enlighten ethical life; stories and narratives will brim with experience and testify to pain, hope and the possibilities of care; oral histories and participatory archives will plumb and deepen memory for the future. All of it, serious work – and there is a lot of it, an expanding expanse of responsible words laden with responsibility.

In it all, there is little time for rhetoric. And perhaps, on some registers, this is fair enough, pending some critical reflection on a field reluctant to move from its safe provincial havens (pick-up and peruse a mainstream ‘public’ speaking textbook). Yet, in the same breath, this aversion to rhetoric may well be wholly irresponsible, for its quick and so very self-sure presumption that there is no question of response-ability. There are to be good words – lots of good words! – for edifying happiness and fine ends in the midst of an ever-changing world. But there is to be little attention to

the conditions and dynamics of such language work, not least the work of *phronesis*, the creative practical wisdom deeply inflected with *poiesis* and *ethos*, that appears at the heart of the humanities language promise but which merits so little attention that the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* can, with a straight face, declare of *phronesis* that ‘the detailed specification of what is involved in such knowledge or understanding has not appeared in the literature’.¹³⁶ That this is simply wrong, a kind of gross miscomprehension of rhetoric’s inquiry reaching back to antiquity, does not mean that we need all be Aristotelians so much as it expresses the truth of Foucault’s wonder as to how we have ‘never attached much importance to the fact that, after all, speech exists’.¹³⁷ Except, one must add, as the object of thinly veiled instrumental acquisition and unscholarly remediation (back to the provinces).

Matters get all the stranger as advocates lament that their words for the humanities fall short and fall on deaf ears, a failure haunted by an unspoken desire for the right word to win the day, the hope for a philistine-repelling rhetorical miracle even as it might appear in the midst of the larger disavowal of rhetoric’s inquiry into the difficult power of language and the uncomfortable value of not assuming that the word is simply ours to use. If the contradiction can be written off, the latter is simply too much, an experience of loss that threatens being and lifeworld alike. Better to declare and police a strict line between rhetoric and reality. One can muddle from there, except that there is no way to tell what is being said in the name of the humanities or how such saying may or may not be working.

As the promise of so many responsible words is unhinged from the (im)potential of response, the humanities basket presupposes what it is tasked to create and tasks itself to create what it can presuppose without question. It comprehends the humanities only by excluding the question of language on the grounds that the question is incomprehensible (that is, what demands order and control) *and* as what threatens to render incomprehensible (that is, beyond what can be grasped, held and possessed) the good word

¹³⁶ R. Hurthouse & G. Pettigrove ‘Virtue ethics’ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 21 December 2018, available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

¹³⁷ M. Foucault *Speech Begins After Death* translated by R. Bononno (2013) 37.

that defines and justifies the humanities. Back and forth, such that the basket is a place that is no place for the question of language and a commonplace in which the question is pre-comprehended. For the humanities and its promise, the basket then may be best understood as euphemism: ‘not saying something with the intention of saying it’ and ‘saying something with the intention not to say it’, all with the aim ‘to speak words that bode well’ by ‘exploit[ing] the resources of acceptance in language’.¹³⁸ All of this, an exceptional movement, a movement in which the humanities are deemed responsible as they take exception from what they are claimed to already be *and* take this exception as the justification for what they must become.

Insisting on and collapsing the difference between comprehension and incomprehension, the basket case promises a space for the words in which to ask after the value of our values, an opening for inquiry that it then rigs like a game on the midway insofar as the basket is laced with philosophical-literary-linguistic moralism that sees little point and less good in talking about talk, especially if it risks not knowing what to say or endeavours to recognise language beyond its use. There is then no space for epideictic speech, not least the eulogy, a probable good word (*eulogos*) and speech of praise (*eulogia*) that resists necessity, not least as it stands before death not just at a loss for words but in the name of this loss, for the word in its dispossession, the beginning again of value in language as such, at the end of tragedy – the word as fully (im) potential, at the edge of (in)comprehension, for now.

At least for now, the humanities remain at the carnival, advocating for a promise of words without hesitation, without pause or doubt of being in full possession of its faculties, all the words that it would have without rhetorical question. And so, for now, the humanities may only fail its declared champion, that ‘public’ which increasingly cannot bear to listen to anything that it does not want to hear. The humanities may pre-empt the decolonisation that they seek to undertake, precisely as they refuse to grasp that the announced potential of their good word can function as a call to wait for power, endlessly. And they

¹³⁸ AG Duttmann ‘Euphemism, the university and disobedience’ (2011)
 169 *Radical Philosophy*, available at <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/euphemism-the-university-and-disobedience>.

may founder on the problem of violence to which they give so much time, at least until the humanities stop communicating and narrating long enough to ask after what the wars are doing to language itself. For now, so much of what is said in the name and on behalf of the humanities remains at a loss for the question of words, at a loss for an experience of language in which *now* is neither the product of hopeless fate nor the premise of an abstract promise.