The Irony of the Humanities

The Humanities and the datafication of sentiment

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Fritz Lang once made a four-and-a-half-hour-long silent film about an archvillain psychoanalyst named Dr. Mabuse who hopes to take over the world through sheer power of will. He’s skilled in hypnotism and, for some reason or other, uses this primarily to lull his gambling opponents into losing all of their money. One of his victims-to-be is the respectable collector Count Told. Invited to a party by Countess Told, Dr. Mabuse finds himself drawn into a bit of playful repartee by the Count. When the Count asks him his thoughts on expressionism, he replies: “Expressionism is just playing about. But—why not? Everything is ‘playing about!’” He then hypnotizes Count Told, forces him to cheat flagrantly in a game of cards, and runs off with the Countess.

I want to tell a similar story about the Humanities and Big Data, or statistically sophisticated methods of analysis. It’s simple: the Humanities are hypnotized by Big Data. They lose their freedom of will by mimicking Big Data’s methods, only to find themselves ruined, deprived of everything they once held dear. In this essay, I want to explain what exactly the Humanities have to fear from Big Data. My claim is not that Big Data is in any way evil or misguided. My interest is in pointing out that an approach to art and literature that concedes its peculiar provenance to these methods will lose something essential about what these endeavors are uniquely positioned to do: awaken us to the sensation of our own freedom and moral agency.
This debate is familiar to a current reader of *The New Republic*, which has devoted considerable attention to “Science vs. the Humanities.” Steven Pinker, the Harvard psychologist, cognitive scientist, and popular writer, suggests there that the sciences are producing results that would have delighted and dazzled many legendary champions of the Humanities: “Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Leibniz, Kant, Smith.” He is therefore baffled as to why humanists today are not so receptive to these developments, and as to why they continue to rally behind the refrain: the Humanities are to be discussed by Humanities folks only. “Though everyone endorses science when it can cure disease, monitor the environment, or bash political opponents,” he laments, “the intrusion of science into the territories of the humanities has been deeply resented.”

Leon Wieseltier, TNR’s literary editor, steps forward as ad hoc representative of the Humanities and Pinker’s chief interlocutor. In “What Big Data Will Never Explain,” he heroically attempts to stave off what he perceives as an encroachment by the sciences into strictly Humanities territory: “The mathematization of subjectivity will founder upon the resplendent fact that we are ambiguous beings. We frequently have mixed feelings, and are divided against ourselves.” Unfortunately, when he writes things like, “The other day I was listening to Mahler in my library. When I caught sight of the computer on the table, it looked small,” it is hard to get past his sense of superiority and see what he wants the Humanities to do.

The entire Pinker-Wieseltier debate is sterilized by its insistence that this be a debate between disciplines. I want to argue that it is actually a debate about how we represent the world and our place in it, and how we use this orientation to produce explanations of the myriad phenomena that make up our lives. Most standard interpretations of science would have it that science is responsible for outlining general laws that describe, impersonally, a given set of phenomena. Science explains phenomena by showing what must happen given certain conditions according to natural laws. And philosophy does this, too. Kant describes how the sensibility and the understanding, not to mention aesthetics and morality, work according to general laws. But he would protest vehemently—despite Pinker’s misreading—against informing these laws with empirical
evidence, with Big Data’s forays into the “datafication of sentiment” and “sentiment analysis,” as Wieseltier deems them. We cannot, Kant says, derive morality from observing life.

It is important to remember that the Humanities—especially visual art, poetry, and literature—also have the potential to utilize alternative methods of explanation that can represent the causes of phenomena as arising from an internal source and as instantiating moments of creation. They allow us to create for ourselves some of the phenomena that constitute human life, rather than merely discovering these phenomena in the external world. Therefore the Humanities must be careful, in reacting to the pressures of our current educational climate, to preserve and emphasize their privileged connection with this latter method of explanation. This will entail maintaining a guarded, but well-articulated skepticism towards the encroachment of Big Data’s methods, and also turning a critical eye toward some of the prevailing tendencies within the Humanities over the past century.

**FREEDOM AND REPRESENTATION**

There is a long tradition in philosophy that draws a direct connection between representation and freedom, and it is a concern for the latter that must steer the Humanities to rediscover its unique position in human intellectual pursuit and to rearticulate its mission accordingly.

Kant is among the thinkers most concerned with this problem. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, he labors to work out the mechanisms underlying how we represent the world to ourselves, and to reconcile these abstract constraints on knowledge and representation with what he believes to be necessary elements of our practical and moral life. He recognizes the opposition between determinism and the freedom of the will, and claims that we desire to accept both, requiring determinism to construct general laws and freedom of will to construct a system of morality in which the individual agent is responsible. Constructing a system that allows us to accept these
opposing notions without falling into an obvious contradiction is, in a sense, what Kant’s critical philosophy is all about.

The nature of the relationship between freedom and representation is also the subject of Henri Bergson’s *Time and Free Will*. Bergson argues that all questions concerning free will arise from representing our internal experiences to ourselves in language made for communicating externally with others. While such (mis)representation is inevitable, we can only recover any notion of freedom through deep, careful introspection, into which we must not import any of the spatial concepts (including language and numerals) required for external communication. When asked to represent any inner experience, we are asked to peer inside the heterogeneous flow of purely qualitative inner sense and to represent it quantitatively, as something that can be represented. That translation is arbitrary and produces a degree of alienation from our free selves. In other words, not only do we swallow the necessary pill of concretizing our indescribable feelings in artificial terms such as “happy” or “confused” or the like, but we go one step further in confusing what we actually feel with what we associate with the word. Our attempt to externally represent these deeply personal inner states costs us our freedom of will: “we live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we ‘are acted’ rather than act ourselves.”

Note that this problem arises regardless of whether we use words or numbers. As the young Hugo von Hofmannsthal reflected in a fictional letter he wrote for a Berlin newspaper in 1902, he could no longer write poetry because his words *always* failed to capture his intended meaning. The point of this discussion is not to provide any solutions to the problem of free will, but instead to emphasize the relationship between representation and free will, which the Humanities must bear strongly in mind when deciding which methods of representation and explanation should be utilized.
There is a different yet related way in which questions of representation factor hugely into the Humanities-Big Data debate: who has the right to speak for “us,” instead of simply for and as an individual?

Stanley Cavell, in his lectures published as A Pitch of Philosophy, is concerned with what he calls the “arrogation of voice”—the tendency of philosophers to use “we” in spite of the fact that they rarely if ever gather empirical evidence to make sure that they are speaking for a majority or even a plurality. He suggests that the justification for such a move lies in autobiography: “Then why do such philosophers say ‘we’ instead of ‘I’? With what justification?...And by whose authority? Their basis is autobiographical, but they evidently take what they do and say to be representative or exemplary of the human condition as such. In this way they interpret philosophy’s arrogance as the arrogation of the right to speak for us.”

Though the implicit premise is that there is at least some degree of universality to the human condition, the ultimate appeal to authority is to autobiography, to the self, because we glimpse these universalities through our own act of meditation. The right to use “we,” then, is dependent upon a sufficiently nuanced and intimate understanding of “I.”

In Mark Edmundson’s much-discussed Harper’s article “Poetry Slam,” he presents a number of arguments that contemporary poetry is insignificant. In a response in The Atlantic, Joel Breuklander brings attention to Edmundson’s claim that poets no longer use “we” or “our”: “This, [Edmundson] writes, is evidence that poetry no longer deals in universal truths. A poet that doesn’t speak as everyone must not have anything big to say about the human condition.” He goes on to find all sorts of first-person plurals in the writings of underrepresented writers whom Edmundson apparently ignores. There are several interesting issues here. However, I am most interested in pointing out that the right to use “we,” to claim to represent a wide swath of humanity, is intimately bound up with a sense of the robustness or relevance of a discipline—as both sides of the debate concede. While the scope of their claims may always be in question, thinkers in any discipline essentially strive to make inductive

generalizations from their own personal cases. That is, they strive for the arrogation of voice, for the right to use “we.”

REALISM, LITERATURE, AND MERE REFLECTION

From this perspective, we begin to see the value in the specific kind of right to use the first-person plural that emerges through an engagement with an individual or autobiography. And this is somewhere the sciences cannot follow. This is the reason Socrates gives in the *Phaedo*, while awaiting his execution, for why he abandoned then-scientific explanations for the theory of the forms. Rejecting the teachings of Anaxagoras, he explains, “Whoever talks in that way is unable to make a distinction and to see that in reality a cause is one thing, and the thing without which the cause could never be a cause is quite another thing. And so it seems to me that most people, when they give the name of cause to the latter, are groping in the dark, as it were, and are giving it a name that does not belong to it.”


Socrates is pointing out the perennial problem plaguing attempts to distinguish correlation and causation: scientific laws are at best able to assign generally reliable correlations, but cannot provide a satisfying account of causation in any particular case, or for any particular “I.” This illustrates the limit of Big Data. The Stanford Literary Lab can analyze “Style At the Scale of the Sentence,” but this aggregate work is no substitute for disentangling an author’s particular choices.

In a world in which the standards of explanation are increasingly borrowed from the sciences—a deductive standard of explanation, which demands that the premises strictly and necessarily compel the conclusion—there exists a temptation to explain one’s actions as a result of societal trends, external influences, and general laws. I love Netflix, vegetarianism, and public radio—but isn’t this all “stuff
white people like”? Can’t most of my tastes be attributed to the fact that I’m an educated, middle-class, twenty-something white male living in a major city?

Nietzsche notices the consequences of this tendency while wondering how Spinoza’s ethical system, which denies free will for the sake of strict determinism, still accounts for morsus conscientiae, or the sting of bad conscience. As Robert Pippin puts Nietzsche’s conclusion, “it is a kind of regret that depends on my not really having had the option to do otherwise.”8 In exposing the fatalism of determinism, Nietzsche alerts us that it is the sensation of conceiving alternate scenarios and actions and the realization of having had the option to act otherwise that constitutes the experience of freedom and of moral agency. If the Humanities exist to teach us about ourselves, they must do so in a way commensurate with the way we experience freedom and moral agency, as only humanistic discourse can.

The editors of n+1 recently took up this problem: how “to account for human freedom and also the determining power of the social world.”9 Part of their answer can be found in their Intellectual Situation, “World Lite,” where, to overcome the paucity of significance in the contemporary literary scene, they propose a new International movement in literature opposed to what they call “global literature,” which often amounts to little more than a pale shadow of global capitalism.10 The model for the International movement seems to have nostalgic roots in twentieth-century modernism—from Joyce and Kafka to Beckett—often fueled by longings for social revolution.

The Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács based his articulation of social realism on an ideology immured in the political maneuvers to survive Stalinism. Though Lukács was a vocal opponent of modernism (perhaps for political reasons), Adorno tells us in Aesthetic Theory that as a prisoner in Romania, Lukács finally realized that even Beckett and Kafka (not Joyce) were realists in his sense of the word. He sees realism as the only legitimate basis for literature: “If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface.”11

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are two main claims here. The first is that art, by reflecting reality, can grasp reality “as it truly is”; in other words, art can disclose truth. The second claim is that the artist needs to have the right perspective in order to do this. In Lukács’s case, the artist must be Marxist and commit herself to exposing the contradictions of liberalism and capitalism. For the editors of n+1, the artist must fix her reflection of the underlying order from an “internationalist” as opposed to a “global” perspective—where “internationalist” is intended to recall the legacy of the First International.

These claims are worrisome for two reasons. The first has to do with truth. The so-called reflection theory of truth has a very long relationship with art. Ralph Waldo Emerson praises Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Raphael for their ability to “resemble a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing.”12 In the Republic, Socrates criticizes the artist as one who is able only to mirror what is already a reflection (of the eternal forms), thus finding himself doubly and triply removed from the truth. But both claims—Emerson’s that the poet can reflect the world accurately and Plato’s that the artist cannot—are undercut by the as-yet unresolved problems plaguing such a reflection theory of truth. As Tom Rockmore explains: “There is simply no way to know that a representation correctly represents without knowing what it represents independently of any representation. Since there is no way to know this, there is no way to know that we know independent reality.”13 At least, we might add, not in any particular instance.

The second, more important reason, is that this task of showing reality as it really is, in a way that lays bare its rotten core by removing its epiphenomenal cloak, falls within the purview of scientific explanation. The familiar strategy, basically Marxist, received its best articulation from Karl Mannheim, who was the first to use the term enthüllung, usually translated as “unmasking.” Mannheim wrote:

> In denying the truth of an idea, I still presuppose it as a ‘thesis’ and thus put myself upon the same theoretical (and nothing but theoretical) basis as the one on which the idea is constituted...But when I do not even raise the question... whether what the idea asserts is true, but consider it mere-
ly in terms of the extra-theoretical function it serves, then, and only then, do I achieve an 'unmasking' which in fact represents no theoretical refutation but the destruction of the practical effectiveness of these ideas.\footnote{Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of a Sociology of Knowledge,” Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge (Oxford: Routledge, 1997), p. 140.}

This is indeed a familiar form of argument among leftist academics in the Humanities. It calls sharply to mind the strategies of artistic montage as advocated by Benjamin and Brecht, among others, as ways of exposing the contradictions of capitalist ideology by literally laying them side by side. It seems to be the basic method of every oppositional humanist who grew up in the tradition of twentieth-century critical theory, as epitomized by the ever-popular Slovene theorist Slavoj Žižek. If we take n+1 as somewhat representative of the current critical left, this approach is clearly still very much alive. It relies on the assumption that by identifying an illusory or contradictory structure as such, we rob it of its power to entrance us and command some sort of erotic attachment; once the structure is seen for what it is, the people will turn their backs in disgust! By now the political efficacy of such an idea should be thoroughly discredited by a mere glance at history and popular culture. Who, when pressed, is not aware of the contradictions that abound in our approaches to domestic security or climate change?

My point is not merely that the efficaciousness of the unmasking approach is empirically questionable. I am arguing that this should not be the defining model of critique within the Humanities. As explanations, methods of reflection and unmasking are constrained to reinforce the inexorable presence of an external structure and provide us with knowledge and understanding from without while neglecting the imporance of individual and social creation. It is true that critical approaches in the Humanities have successfully exploited these methods as a step toward positive social and political awareness and reform. Nonetheless, they derive from a method of deterministic, rather than autonomous, self-representation and are thus fundamentally scientific explanations. Assigning the Humanities to focus primarily on such a project today is to enlist them in...
the ranks of the very trends that currently threaten the vitality of their discourses. If the Humanities are to preserve a space of their own, they must look elsewhere.

**IRONY AND TRANSCENDENCE**

In *A Case for Irony*, Jonathan Lear describes the uncanny ironic experience as a moment in which the familiar, namely ourselves, comes back to us as unfamiliar and thereby shakes us up. These are the rare moments in which we are capable of blasting through the norms in which we are typically enshrouded, and instead catch a glimpse of genuine alterity. “When irony hits its mark,” he explains, “the person who is its target has an uncanny experience that the demands of an ideal, value, or identity to which he takes himself to be already committed dramatically transcend the received social understandings.”

What is unique about ironic experience—as directly opposed to an unmasking—is the fact that it directs those whom it strikes outside what is given, outside what could ever present itself as the possible target of an unmasking, to something that cannot be reflected or unmasked, to something that cannot be represented because it simply is not, nor perhaps has ever been, present.

Lear works to excavate the notion of irony as understood by Kierkegaard in a paradigmatic ironic question: “In all of Christendom, is there a Christian?” Lear argues that Christianity (which beyond even capitalism is perhaps the “dreadful illusion” *par excellence*) in an ordinary sense contains within it space for reflection on the question of what it means to be a Christian. But, this ordinary reflection is an act within Christianity: “Christendom aims to be (and when it is vibrant it for the most part is) closed under reflection: for its inhabitants, reflection is possible, even encouraged, but is not itself sufficient to get one outside it.”


but all that one can see in the reflection is circumscribed within the limits of the system; only from the outside can one conceive of legitimate alternatives.

This shortcoming of reflection is not a problem peculiar to Christianity. It applies in any situation in which one’s own practical identity is the topic of investigation, or every mode of questioning that takes seriously Kierkegaard’s dictum that “to become human does not come that easily.” That is, it applies in the Humanities. Under the guise of reconnecting us with our free selves, an approach to the Humanities that focuses on reflection and unmasking merely reinforces the presence of a structure already imposed from without. It has us discovering what we are, rather than creating who we are.

Lear points to the peculiar human experience of feeling like one doesn’t quite fit into one’s own skin. It is in this excess, this unfitted part—which for Lear, a psychoanalyst, is an unconscious node of selfhood—that he suggests we are to look for the sources of transcendent irony. It is, therefore, an explanation grounded in the individual autobiography, yet one in which we are uniquely disposed to create new, universally applicable tropes and practical identities.

Perhaps we can call to mind the role played in the art and literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by bohemia, characterized by Thierry de Duve as “a literary and imaginary country where, in a deformed image at once tragic and ideal, there was dreamed a humanity to replace the real humankind that peopled nineteenth-century Europe, and that industrial capitalism had pitilessly set against itself.” It is such a vision of a newly imagined world and mankind, a new bohemia, that irony can both encourage and preserve.

Marx himself provides a model for a depiction of reality underwritten by a longing for transcendence and re-imagination—indeed, for a realistic critique inspired by an imaginative conception of what could be. The legacy of Marxism is of course the critique of capitalism, which has provided a lens for unmasking analyses ever since. But, from the first instance, wasn’t Marx driven to provide this critique by a longing for a transcendent ideal: the realization of

the species-being? And isn’t Marx’s prose, even in the otherwise dry *Capital*, profoundly ironic at its finest moments?

The Humanities must resist the temptation to seek to save themselves by taking refuge in the Big Data turn of mind. The very nature of explanation implicit in such an approach is at odds with their spirit. Mere reflection of the social situation cannot alleviate the burden of living in a world in which conceiving of alternative scenarios has become an increasingly onerous task, and one is more and more prone to the resignation of learning who one is from without. The goal of the Humanities today should be to create space for the ironic experiences Lear describes: experiences that are intensely autobiographical, yet reach some connection with a transcendent universal space of alternatives, allowing for a true realization of freedom.