

## From the Editor

### **The Humanities, Democracy, and the Charlatan Who Came Ambling Along**

*James Hamby*

Whenever I consider how best to make an argument for the study of the humanities, the first thing that pops into my mind is Louis Armstrong's response when he was asked what jazz is: "If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know." For those of us who love the humanities, it is easy to see the value of disciplines such as art, history, and literature: they shape us, help us navigate the world, give value and meaning to our lives. Yet explaining this to administrators and politicians who weigh "value" only in monetary terms often proves difficult, and they view the humanities only as a superfluous pastime. We have struggled with an assault on the humanities—once widely considered the foundation of the university—for decades now, yet in the past three months the humanities have come under attack in the United States as never before.

It was my intention when I started this journal to never engage in politics, and especially not in partisan politics. I wanted instead to focus on literature and avoid contributing to the hyperpoliticization of *everything* in our society. Furthermore, I am loath to give any additional attention to Donald Trump, who has plagued the world with his presence and has garnered far more attention than he merits for far too long. However, his administration's efforts, led by Elon Musk (an unelected bureaucrat, never confirmed by congress, whom Trump selected to head a pretend agency to execute illegal actions) is systematically attacking the arts by defunding the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and I feel it would be irresponsible for anyone who teaches or researches in the humanities to remain silent.

The reason for this assault is obvious: Trump, Musk, and their cronies fear the power of an enlightened citizenry. This is nothing new in the annals of authoritarianism. Knowing history,

understanding how political systems work, thinking critically about society, empathizing with others different from ourselves, dreaming of ways society could renew itself—these are all outcomes of a humanities-based education that authoritarians fear. The Trump administration’s slashing of the NEH, its hostility towards institutions of higher education such as Harvard University, its defunding of public radio and television, its hostile takeover of the Kennedy Center, and its overall strange obsession with the idea of “wokeness” ruining the teaching of art and history all testify to the anti-intellectual, anti-educational bent of Trump’s agenda.

To make matters worse, other politicians across the country have followed Trump in attacking education. Book bans are among the most salient example of this assault. In Rutherford County, Tennessee, where I live, several books in the past year have been banned in the school system, including Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961), a novel that I first read in high school and that had an enormous impact on me. Fittingly, one of the key themes in that story is that systems of corrupt power endanger our freedom. I am enormously saddened by the thought that high school students in my county will not be exposed to this major work of American literature in their school libraries. Another development in my home state of Tennessee is the recent attempt by some members of the state’s General Assembly to pass a bill (thankfully, the session ended without it passing) allowing public schools to deny education to children who have immigrated without necessary documentation. The obvious racism of this bill is chilling, and the overt attempt to keep certain populations unempowered by denying education to their children is disgusting. Yet what takes this racism and classism to an even more appalling level is the way the supporters of this bill are attempting to essentially nullify the Fourteenth Amendment. In what has come to be known as the “Equal Protection Clause” of Section One, this amendment guarantees that no state shall “deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of its laws.” The Supreme Court, in *Brown*

*v. Board of Education*, enshrined the idea that this clause applies to children's right to education. The framers of the Fourteenth Amendment (the primary author was Representative John A. Bingham of Ohio) wisely chose the word "person" rather than "citizen" to ensure that everyone, regardless of citizenship status, would be able to enjoy their rights without government interference, and that the government could never again create a category of people who had no rights, as had been done to enslaved African-Americans (though there have been many times when this principle was violated). Our politicians today would do well to remember the betrayal of American values that occurred during slavery and the Jim Crow era. These politicians' and the Trump administration's disregard of constitutional law should shock all Americans.

Trump's attack on learning is not limited to the humanities, however, and it extends to science as well. During the last Trump administration, the president referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as a "hoax." Trump has long denied climate change and often asserts that scientists do not know what they are talking about. Robert Kennedy, Jr., the Secretary of Health and Human services, has expressed skepticism of vaccines and constantly spouts medical misinformation. Trump's budget cuts have included reductions in funding for scientific research, including research for treating Alzheimer's disease. As with the attack on the humanities, what underlies budget cuts for science is not merely a desire to balance the federal budget, but something more sinister. Carl Sagan once observed that

Science is more than a body of knowledge. It is a way of thinking, a way of skeptically interrogating the universe with a fine understanding of human fallibility. If we are not able to ask skeptical questions, to interrogate those who tell us that something is true, to be skeptical of those in authority, then, we are up for grabs for the next charlatan—political or religious—who comes ambling along.

The Trump administration's contempt for science is yet another attempt to keep the populace ignorant so that he may not be questioned.

As someone who studies the nineteenth century, it is striking to me how much Donald Trump's worldview is shaped by the worst aspects of that century—his white supremacy, his desire for territorial expansion *à la* Manifest Destiny, his obsession in returning to tariffs as an economic policy, his hostility to women's rights, his embrace of violence. Even as I was working on this essay, news broke that he wants to reopen Alcatraz—an institution that began as a military post and later served as an internment camp for Indigenous Americans in the nineteenth century. Trump's worldview relies on the fiction that the nineteenth century was a golden age rather than a gilded age.

The three articles included in this issue wonderfully demonstrate the ways in which the humanities can give us a better world. Justin Rogers's work on Edith Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* examines the cognitive gains that accompany reading fiction. Leslie de Bont's article explores an example of late nineteenth-century utopic science fiction. Nash Meade's essay shows how the *Dishonored* video game franchise critiques power structures. Additionally, many of the works covered in the media and book reviews sections below also deal with issues of power and society.

It has been interesting to me to hear the joke, frequent on the internet, that we are in "the worst possible timeline"—or something to that effect. People who say this no doubt have some time travel or multiverse science fiction in mind, such as the *Back to the Future* series (1985-1990), *Rick and Morty* (2013-present), or *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018). It is a testament to the way we conceive of our own lives in terms of narratives. The study of literature, of art, of the humanities is not something extraneous; it is an essential part of our human existence.

The right to study ideas is the basis of our freedom in a democratic society, and institutions of higher learning are essential to fostering that study. As my wife, Holly Hamby, once observed in an address at Fisk University, “The humanities are the foundation from which the university rises.” Trump’s attacks on the humanities, science, and higher education are nothing less than attacks on our freedom.

The humanities are under assault, but we must remember that the best way to preserve the humanities is to practice them. Read, write, go to museums, attend concerts. As I said before, I am not writing this out of a desire to engage in Democratic Party versus Republican Party politics; rather, I am writing to support democracy over authoritarianism, freedom of thought over obedience through fear, and enlightenment over darkness. As many others have observed, history does not typically remember those who ban books or suppress knowledge as “the good guys.” While I respect a wide array of political opinions, we should all be able to unite against autocracy, and we should all recognize evil when it stares us in the face. Though the humanities may be under assault, literature has taught us the ways that we can be the heroes of our own stories, and we must remember the importance that even the smallest acts of resistance can bear. No amount of budget cuts or anti-intellectual fervor will ever defeat the human spirit or the desire to learn, and we thwart the autocrat’s desire to dominate us simply by thinking our own thoughts.