correspondents at large

Useful Humanism

DORIS SOMMER

I USED TO WORRY A LOT ABOUT WHAT GOOD WE DO IN THE HUMANITIES. SOMETIMES I'D GET SO SORE FROM THE EVERYDAY ETHICAL BARBS that interrupt a literature teacher's chain of thought that my thinking would get derailed from aesthetic questions to questions of their importance. The moments that haunted me most were when graduate students would wonder why—when the world was so urgently in need of practical contributions—they should write a dissertation about this or that literary genre or motif or formal property. They didn't doubt that preparing to teach in the arts is an enormous pleasure and also a privilege. But what redeems the profession from irresponsibility? What direct or indirect outcomes could justify the resources of time and money, the intellectual passions that can replace sleep at night, the dedication to writing books that (by my hardly admirable example) can trump even a mother's attention to her children? Can we, in good faith, counsel students to pursue humanistic careers when the same barbs that bother us may prick their conscience if they manage to land a job?

Yes, we can, I'm relieved to say, now that I've read Hannah Arendt's lectures on Kant's aesthetics, begun to read Antonio Gramsci with my colleague Francesco Ersparmer, and witnessed firsthand how political, economic, and emotional development depends on art. Training a disposition to engage and admire creativity can make art's contributions visible in ways that turn lessons into opportunities (or obligations) to work constructively in the world. I'll gloss this point briefly, and I look forward to interchanges on it.

At the beginning of her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt jokes that of course Kant didn't write on politics. Instead, he wrote on aesthetics as the most certain, if indirect, way to get to politics. With the French Revolution as backdrop for his 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, indirection was prudent for a cautious man. Caution and care also encouraged Kant to build a theory of the public sphere from adoptions by individual citizens. His was not an appeal to the "general will" of the French and Bolshevik revolutions, from which Arendt recoils, but a foundation in subjectivity that could be trained to

DORIS SOMMER is director of the Cultural Agents Initiative and professor of Romance languages at Harvard University. Her recent books are *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Duke UP, 2004) and *Cultural Agents in the Americas* (Duke UP, 2006). Dedicated currently to developing collaborations among artists, academics, and public institutions of learning and law, Sommer is exploring the ways that arts and humanities are resources for society.

© 2006 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.5.1670 Published online by Cambridge University Press

agree with other subjects through exercising judgment. Judgment is an innate faculty, like reason and imagination, but it went almost undetected or flaccid from underuse during long centuries of authoritarianism. Subjects of a king or a church, serfs, slaves, and students of classical curricula don't need to exercise judgment because they don't make choices. But intellectual freedom in the Enlightenment makes choice possible and therefore obligatory. For the first time in Western history, Arendt says, common people needed to develop their faculty of judgment. And the training is none other than aesthetic education. Because they are free from interest, subjective observations regarding beauty and the sublime don't depend on reason or morality or any preestablished concept of good or bad. An aesthetic judgment is a second-order response to pleasure or displeasure: after the immediate feeling, we judge if it was free of interest, in which case we imagine that others might share the same pleasure, independent of concerns that affect us differentially. Through aesthetic judgment, subjectivity makes a bridge to other subjects and promotes a shared sense of freely acknowledged value. This "common sense," Kant's clever resignification of everyday wisdom in everyman, derives from aesthetics and becomes the foundation for a public sphere.

Kant kept free of active involvement; he preferred to observe, not to engage with the world. But his disciple Friedrich Schiller insisted that aesthetics demands hands-on achievement of form, not only judgment of existing objects. The modern subject is an agent in creating a cultural and political environment, so that arts education was a self-evident and urgent project for Schiller. In ways that I only intuit and hope to develop soon, Schiller is an inspiration for Antonio Gramsci, a fellow traveler of the cultural agents I most admire.

Take Antanas Mockus, for example. In 1995, as the newly elected mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, he proposed a bold program. He put culture to work in a city that had been so violent and corrupt for over a decade that it was the only place in the Americas banned to tourists by airport advisories. What could be done in a place so troubled that investments of money and force would have magnified, not mitigated, the disaster? If civic spirit had worn so thin that it refused fiscal cures and security measures, the first prescription was to revive the spirit through art, antics, and accountability. First a philosopher and then a public servant, Mockus made theory yield practices that would then yield more reflection. He sidestepped conventional struggles that stayed stuck between fear and opportunism. Like Gramsci, Mockus refused to wait for better conditions and instead promoted a "passive revolution" through the power of culture. Gramsci's response to unbeatable odds makes him something of a patron saint of cultural agency. Using culture as a wedge to open up necessary civil conditions for decent politics and economic growth, workers would get beyond economistic deadlocks and move toward the goal of emancipation.

For Mockus civility was goal enough, and getting there became an experiment that mixed fun with function (imagine combining Schiller's playful education for self-made subjects with Kant's appeal to intersubjective judgment inspired by aesthetics). The municipality's inspired staff hired pantomime artists to direct traffic. The spectacles generated an interactive public of spectators. The mayor's team printed thousands of laminated cards with a green thumbs-up on one side and red thumbs-down on the other for drivers to flash in judgment of their fellows. Vaccination against violence was one citywide performance therapy against the cliché of an "epidemic" of aggression. Arts programs in schools, rock concerts in parks, a monthly "ciclovía" that closed streets to traffic and opened them to bikers and walkers have, among other civic games and alongside rigorous educational programs, helped to revive the metropolis.

Citizens now pay their taxes, often above what they owe to support a particular library or

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.5.1670 Published online by Cambridge University Press

park or senior program. Between 1993 and 2003, the end of Mockus's second term, one stunning indicator of change is the rate of homicide, reduced by sixty-five percent. Today Bogotá feels the strain of migrants who flee zones of conflict for this newfound haven. As they overload the city's systems, planners suggest that migration might slow down if cultural agency stepped up in still-troubled areas of the country.

Throughout the Americas, culture is a vehicle for agency. Photographers teach visual literacy and whet young appetites for other arts and sciences. Theatrical improvisations provide dramatic outlets for frustration while rehearsing roles that rise to daunting challenges. Without the Teatro Campesino, César Chávez could not have organized the United Farm Workers' Union. Perhaps the most far-reaching case is Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. The multiplier effect of his lessons in listening to disadvantaged social actors and encouraging them to take the stage resulted in his two-term election to the city council of Rio de Janeiro. There he promoted legislation suggested by audiences and actors in marginal neighborhoods; thirteen of their laws passed, and several were adopted at the national level. Alongside these artist-activists are musicians, dancers, poets, and painters, of the past and present, who are not yet subjects of many academic studies but might inspire the kind of creative reflection that amounts to a civic contribution.

In Bogotá, no one asks what "cultural agency" means. The concept resonates with a variety of public practices that link creativity with social contributions. But elsewhere the term can require definition. Maybe this shows a lack of such activity, but I suspect that activity is almost everywhere. What we lack instead is perspective on the family resemblances among a variety of repertoires and remixes. Recognizing these resemblances and promoting replication of artful interventions can be our professional contribution through at least two standard approaches to the arts: we highlight particular creative practices, and we give those practices a theoretical spin.

The first value added by humanists follows from simply noting and commenting on examples of arts that build society. Drawing attention to undervalued creative practices offers them as models to inspire variations and choices for research projects. We choose, after all, which texts, phenomena, or practices, which perspectives or approaches, merit extended consideration in a scholarly essay. Allow me to mention my own choice as a literary critic. Instead of focusing on popular cultural studies topics such as violence, necrophilia, consumerism, or abuse of human rights, I chose to focus a new book and course on "bilingual aesthetics." The invented topic names a common feature of language arts that is underrepresented in single-language scholarship. Bilingual games cross country limits; they evince histories of migration, complicated belonging, and flexible identity, as well as aesthetic (and cognitive, political, and philosophical) advantages. My preference for emphasizing these creative compensations for the difficulty of living in two or more languages is meant to renew appreciation for literary specificity in the face of cultural nationalism. It also promotes a new sentimental education that takes seriously the formalist defense of strangeness as art's signature effect. We can teach enjoyment of strangeness and thereby counteract the damaging stigma of speaking home languages in intolerant host countries. The project acknowledges the pleasures and self-respect that code switchers earn by dint of their virtuosity, despite sometimes making embarrassing mistakes. Mistakes can brighten speech with a *sun-risa* (Hernández Cruz) or give the pleasure of a found poem. Always they mark communication with a cut or a tear that comes close to producing an aesthetic effect. The risk and thrill of speaking or writing anything can sting every time language fails us. Knowing how language can fail makes success feel like a small miracle. In other words, bilingual aesthetics casts the precarious subjects as self-authorizing and original agents, even in the face of monolingual nativists (Huntington).

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.5.1670 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The course on bilingual arts is heavy on theory, partly to demonstrate that theory is practically second nature to bilingual people, who normally abstract expression from meaning, and partly to display a range of refinements that follow from the "open sesame" of bilingual rereadings of literary classics from Hemingway and William Carlos Williams to Kafka and Nabokov. Companion assignments in aesthetics, liberalism, nationalism, language philosophy, deconstruction, formalism, and feminism underline the advantages of thinking outside the monolingual box. The course, like the book, is about added value, not remediation. And the addition sets off a chain of enhancements when students engage in the "service learning" component of the course. They teach and translate in local schools, immigration centers, and law offices, where they gain new appreciation for the everyday arts of code switching.[1]

Cultural agency is an invitation to notice felicitous engagements as well as frustrating performances. And since the approach privileges the surprise of ingenious responses to difficult challenges, it can sustain the attention of humanists trained to value art for producing uncommon effects. Alongside the endgame of critique, humanists can play the gambit of reflecting on an inexhaustible range of creative moves and on their immediate or delayed effects. The objective for cultural agents is not a partisan victory but the development of "thick" political subjects who participate in democratic life. Democracy depends on sturdy and resourceful citizens able to engage more than one point of view and to wrest rights and resources from limited assets. Nonauthoritarian government counts on creativity to loosen conventional thought and free up the space where conflicts are negotiated before they reach the brink of despair or aggression. Aesthetic education, Schiller insisted at the beginning of the republican age, is necessary for civic development.[2] The sometimes delayed social effects of aesthetic education can rush skeptics to conclude that the one thing has little to do with the other. But hasty conclusions misprize the gradual process of subject formation. In the end, results will be important, as talented administrators like Mockus maintain. He developed innovative, often indirect, measures of changing attitudes to test particular cultural programs. His fans, including artists and teachers, are cured of an allergy to numbers.

I, for one, am also cured of sleepless worries about what art has to do with ethics. I now encourage students to pursue a passion for literature, hopeful that their faculty of free judgment and their creative engagement with their own students will amount to the bricks and the mortar to rebuild a strong civil society.

Notes

1. José Luis Falconi, administrator for the course, is also the associate director of the Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard University.

2. Schiller's program for modern citizenship is *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters* (1795). He wrote the letters to open dead ends in politics through art that wrests freedom from contradiction. Sentimental, tormented art like Schiller's, unlike Goethe's naive genius, can be taught; it thrives in the distance from nature where poets have freedom to maneuver. Freedom's dependence on self-consciousness and the promise of a new spontaneity based on reflection became the themes of Schiller's pedagogy. It turned Kant's lessons about the differences between beauty and the sublime, love and respect, nature and artistic genius, into a progression from before aesthetic education to after it. See especially the first three points in the ninth letter (55).

Works Cited

Arendt, Hannah. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Ed. Ronald Beiner. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.

Hernández Cruz, Víctor. "You Gotta Have Your Tips on Fire." *Mainland: Poems*. New York: Random, 1973. 3–4.

Huntington, Samuel. *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon, 2004.

Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*. 1790.

Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*. 1795. Ed. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby. New York: Oxford UP, 1982.

Sommer, Doris. *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.5.1670 Published online by Cambridge University Press