

# Angus Nicholls: WHAT IS 'PROGRESS' IN THE HUMANITIES? (As Seen from the Perspective of Literary Studies)

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If one thing can be learned from the recent boom in the apparently 'new' field of the 'history of the humanities', it is that, especially in the humanities, the history of an academic discipline is never mere history, because the research questions that inaugurate a discipline continue to subsist at its foundations. Knowledge in the humanities, it seems, develops differently. In many fields, 'progress' is far less linear than in the natural sciences; indeed, research programmes may shuttle back and forth between different epochs, with interpretations of the past continually shedding new light upon the present.

This has been demonstrated by the ways in which citation practices in some humanities fields differ vastly from those in the natural sciences. As some scholars have also noted, this makes research assessment in the humanities difficult: bibliometrics often don't work convincingly, and the criteria for evaluating research are often laden with implicit or explicit ideological assumptions about what the field is meant to achieve, especially in areas such as literary studies. As Joseph North's recent political history of Anglophone literary criticism shows, a discipline which saw itself as by and large 'aesthetic' up until the middle of the twentieth-century underwent a radical and politically liberating transformation during the 1960s, becoming the site upon which various politico-aesthetic projects battled over the question not only of how to *read* texts, but also how to *select* them for study. Under these conditions, North points out, it became difficult even to agree about what the proper objects of knowledge might be, not to mention how such knowledge might 'progress'.<sup>[1]</sup>

## The 'Image Problem' of the Humanities

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Partly in response to some of these questions, a certain version of the 'history of the humanities' is currently attempting to establish itself as a new research paradigm. The leading figure in this project is Rens Bod, whose monumentally ambitious *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (2013) originally appeared in Dutch in 2010. The research programme announced in Bod's book and in the first issue of the exciting new journal *History of the Humanities* (published under Bod's direction since 2016) proceeds on the basis that the humanities "suffer from a serious image problem" because they are viewed as "a luxury pastime which is of little use to society and even less to the economy." One way of addressing this apparent crisis, according to Bod, is to show that many insights provided by the humanities "dealt with concrete problems and resulted in applications in entirely unexpected fields."<sup>[2]</sup> To name just one of the many examples cited in Bod's astonishingly

rich overview, the discovery of Sanskrit grammar by the Indian grammarian Panini sometime between the 7th and 5th centuries BCE laid the foundations not only for linguistics but also for the formal grammars of modern computer science (pp. 353-54).

In this connection, it should be noted that Bod's own background is in logic, language and computation, a fact which provides some insight into his view of the modern humanities. Bod's narrative is best summed up in the introduction to a [related publication](#) on the modern humanities that appeared under his co-editorship. Here Bod and his co-editors observe that while the "image problem" of the humanities "has been analyzed and rebutted by many, it is often forgotten that the very distinction between the humanities and the natural sciences is a relatively recent one, and that practices in the sciences and humanities point at a continuum rather than at a divide between the interpretative and the analytical ... More than that, with the current advent of digital humanities ... the two fields seem to have come together again in the twenty-first century." [3]

### Idiographic Judgements as Value Judgements

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A central feature of Bod's story about the humanities is his attempt to refute the heuristic distinction between the *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften* (natural sciences and humanities) that was delineated by a series of German philosophers in the late nineteenth century, most notably Wilhelm Dilthey and Wilhelm Windelband. Bod's claim (pp. 7, 257) is that Windelband, writing in his famous [Strasbourg Rectorial Address](#) of 1894, described the natural sciences as exclusively *nomothetic* – establishing general scientific laws such as those found in physics or chemistry – whereas the humanities focus more on unique and individual events or artefacts, thus being described as *idiographic*. The former category corresponds with what Dilthey described as causal explanation (*erklären*) while the latter is associated with empathetic understanding (*verstehen*). Perhaps the central argument of Bod's book is the indisputable claim that several fields in the humanities – such as linguistics, musicology, art theory and even literary studies in its more formalist manifestations – have always searched for regular patterns or nomothetic laws in their objects of investigation. But the further claim that Bod develops from this rather obvious initial proposition is a far more contestable one: suggesting not only that the allegedly "pointed antithesis" established by Windelband is misleading and "not historically correct" (p. 257), but also that it undersells the nomothetic knowledge-creating power of the humanities. This, Bod believes, is the source of the 'image problem' suffered by the humanities.

The first thing to point out here is that Windelband does not establish the nomothetic-idiographic dualism as an absolute opposition, but rather argues that the distinction between these two categories is merely relative, and that "it is possible – and it is in fact the case – that the same subjects can be the object of both nomothetic and idiographic investigation." [4] There is thus no sense in which Windelband claims that the humanities are exclusively idiographic, even if *history* – and not the humanities in general – may be predominantly so in his view. Second, and far more problematically, Bod offers no analysis of what the term idiographic *means* in Windelband's essay. For Windelband, an idiographic fact is one that is selected out of a myriad of other potential facts so that it can be used to make a significant argument. To use one of Windelband's examples: we know

from Goethe's locksmith bill that he had a doorbell and a key made in 1780. But in Windelband's view, this historical datum does not become a fact of scientific knowledge until it is integrated into a larger historical narrative. As Windelband observes: "in the scientific sense, 'fact' is already a teleological concept."<sup>[5]</sup> The decision to focus on certain historical details – and, crucially, *not upon others* – involves the tacit positing of an overall narrative to which those details will contribute in an organic part-whole relation, and such decisions always involve value judgements that are conditioned by history, culture and ideology. Bod's brief critique of Windelband – which is central to the overall framing of his book – offers no account of the value-laden processes involved in the creation of idiographic facts, processes which are central to many of the humanities.

### **Implications for Literary Studies: The Same Old Canon Question**

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This is not just a minor shortcoming, because when we turn our view to literary studies, it becomes immediately clear that Windelband's point about facts and value judgements is central to the discipline, especially with respect to university curricula. Here a phenomenological point of view can help us. Hans Blumenberg has made the useful distinction between one's own lifetime (*Lebenszeit*) and the total history of the world or world-time (*Weltzeit*), with the former being a tiny fraction of the latter. To translate this into Windelband's terms: there is way too much historical data for us to absorb, so we must select our facts carefully to tell the stories that we think are important. To make a completely banal point: in academic literary studies, we even need to shrink Blumenberg's category of lifetime down to semester-time. If I am teaching a one-semester course, I need to choose my texts carefully, and here my choices will also be idiographic ones that are based on value-judgements. In other words: every course involves the creation of a de facto canon which may be selected according to either implicit or explicit criteria. Of course, these criteria can no longer pretend to offer a purely aesthetic or "disinterested" selection of "the best that is known and thought in the world", as was famously argued by the nineteenth-century father of modern Anglophone criticism, Matthew Arnold. As North's book shows, such choices have always been 'interested' and may be made in accordance with historical, national-geographical, political, gender- or genre-related criteria.

Here the contrast between North's more specialist study and Bod's generalist overview is a striking one. Bod does examine prescriptive or normative rules for poetics in the classical and early modern periods, as well offering some discussion of canonicity in the history of art; crucially, however, these discussions relate to periods before the creation of modern academic disciplines. But when it comes to *modern* literary studies – namely as a discipline taught in universities – Bod's account does not address the issue of the canon. For Bod, the central figures in the history of the modern discipline are mainly nomothetic pattern-seekers: Russian formalists such as Vladimir Propp or structuralists in the manner of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes. The hermeneutical tradition that originates in Dilthey, and before him, in Schleiermacher, is admittedly afforded some discussion. But Bod reaches the curious conclusion that Hans-Georg Gadamer's version of hermeneutics – in which one's culturally conditioned prejudices or pre-understandings are the *a priori* lenses through which we initially view not only individual texts, but also the entire tradition –

simply does not belong in his vision of the humanities: “with its anticipatory starting point, hermeneutics is in essence outside the scope of our quest for methodical principles” (p. 334).

This is precisely the same blind-spot that can be found in Bod’s impoverished account of Windelband: in many of the humanities, we select and view our objects of study through value systems or pre-understandings of which we may not be entirely conscious. This process of selection is essentially the task of canon formation, however politically dubious that designation might sound today. But to speak of the canon in this way is not to make the reactionary claim that we must return to reading what Gadamer called the ‘classics’, or to lists of ‘great books’ in the manner of Harold Bloom; it is merely to observe that since our time is limited, we have to make choices. A pluralistic scenario in which many competing canons might exist at any one time, and in which canons are continually being posited, deconstructed and reconstructed, is an entirely healthy one for our field, even if it carries the unavoidable risk of causing ideological ‘culture wars’ and fragmentation, a subject discussed at some length in North’s book. Canon formation remains one of the central tasks of our discipline, and it is, in the highest sense, an idiographic task. To translate this into Bod’s terms: before we can even start searching for nomothetic patterns in literary works, we must choose a corpus in which to find them. Whether we like it or not, these choices are invariably value-laden.

### **Digital Analysis of ‘the Canon’**

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To be fair, these criticisms must be put in perspective; they are the partisan complaints of a literary scholar, and are being levelled at a book that covers the histories of philology, linguistics, musicology, historiography, literary studies and art theory from antiquity to the present, not just in the West, but globally. The scope of Bod’s undertaking is vast and his achievement is, purely in terms of scale and detail, remarkable; his aim, I take it, is to stimulate discussion about the histories of these disciplines, and my criticisms are to be taken in that spirit of wider inquiry.

Nonetheless, the vision of the *modern* humanities that Bod’s book offers is not only severely attenuated and to some degree inaccurate, it is also worrying and potentially dangerous. Its subtext is the claim that in their discovery of nomothetic patterns, the humanities are in many ways just like the natural sciences, and that this is a *very good thing*. Following a similar logic, digital humanities – with its search for nomothetic patterns within huge archives that no human or humans could ever possibly read in one lifetime – is in some ways the *telos* of Bod’s story. Here the search for general laws can be carried out in an intensified way, with hypotheses being tested through computational experiments that yield quantifiable patterns of data. This kind of work is also conducted at self-proclaimed *scientific* sites such as the Literary Lab for ‘computational criticism’, originally set up by Franco Moretti at Stanford in 2010.

Of interest here is the fact that the Literary Lab has, in recent years, set its sights upon the canon. In a recent project reported on in full here, Literary Lab researchers explored how so-called ‘distant reading’ – namely: the digital analysis of large text-corpora using algorithms designed to isolate and draw conclusions from specific textual features – can

be used to answer canonical questions in an empirical and in that sense 'scientific' way. One such experiment involved asking whether linguistic variation and lack of redundancy is a feature common to texts normally described as canonical. Here the selection criteria for this corpus was entirely transparent, if rather limited and subjective: the 'canon' for some of these experiments was a collection of 250 novels written in English during the nineteenth-century, and collected in the Chadwyck-Healey Collection of Nineteenth-Century Fiction, an anthology compiled by just two editors. The redundancy values of these texts were then measured against those of a much larger and non-canonical archive of novels from the same period.

The results were surprising and in some ways contradictory and inconclusive: according to one measure, which tested the frequency at which the same 'bigrams' or two-word units occur in individual novels, Jane Austen was, as one might expect, one of the least repetitive and therefore one of the most 'canonical' authors within the corpus. The redundancy values of the canon-corpus were in general also much lower than those of the larger archive, a finding which confirmed expectations. Yet at the same time, another experiment, which used the type/token ratio method of corpus linguistics to measure lexical variability, yielded a result in which canonical texts displayed *lower* variability: indeed, a passage from George Eliot's *Adam Bede* was the least variable text within the corpus. The Literary Lab researchers were then forced to revert to close readings of these authors to understand these confusing results, suggesting that a combination of 'distant' and 'close' reading will be the way forward for this research paradigm (this, incidentally, is one of the questions that has been discussed in a recent special issue of the PMLA devoted to 'distant reading'). Summing up the outcomes of recent research conducted at the Literary Lab in the preface to a collaborative book on the subject, Moretti admitted that the results were disappointing: "digital humanities have presented themselves as a radical break with the past, and must therefore produce evidence of such a break. The evidence, let's be frank, is not strong."<sup>[6]</sup> In short: digital humanities is a very long way indeed from developing a reliable empirical method for testing canonicity.

### **Asking Questions That Don't Have Final Answers**

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But even if digital humanities and 'distant reading' could perform such a feat, would this also in some way offer an empirical justification for which texts to include on one's courses and which to exclude? The answer is no, because the Literary Lab is asking an entirely different question. Not: Which texts should we read? But rather: What are the empirically testable features of traditional canonicity and what does this tell us about the canon? It is therefore difficult to see how Bod's search for nomothetic patterns could resolve such cardinal and perennial questions of the humanities as: What should we read? As Windelband showed, such questions are teleological and therefore not susceptible of being answered within an empirical or nomothetic frame. They can, however, be *addressed* by critical dialogue or what used to be called ideology critique.

Indeed, at least from the perspective of literary studies, the fact that such questions cannot be resolved once and for all may help us to understand what is distinctive about our field. To claim that this apparent impasse amounts to an 'image problem' is to elide the critical function of the humanities within liberal democracies, and to suggest that they

might be better advised to focus on the discovery of nomothetic patterns that can be usefully deployed in the economy. It is to say, in other words, that we need to 'sell ourselves' better, but it might also turn out to mean selling ourselves down the river. This is of course the dream of many politicians, educational bureaucrats and university administrators, especially those who focus on the economic impact of scientific research. For this very reason, it is no coincidence that the first and, at least by implication, the most important descriptor of Academic Impact offered by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is 'benefit to the economy'.

Here the classical arguments in favour of literary studies – arguments which, as North's book shows, have been made in English time and again at least since Matthew Arnold and I.A. Richards – remain relevant, if rather predictable. One version of this argument is simply to say that evaluating literary texts and discussing the principles of canon formation helps to make students into critical thinkers and better citizens. This also means – at least by implication – to 'intervene in the state of culture' in something like a normative way, however vaguely that may be defined.[Z] Contemporary academics who also act as public intellectuals – such as Stefan Collini in the United Kingdom – are saying pretty much the same thing, though thankfully in a much more politically conscious and nuanced way than someone like Arnold did. Bod's book nods to these arguments but does not evaluate any of them. His focus is simply a different one, implicitly suggesting that appeals to practical utility and quantifiable results will be more likely to sway the powers that be, thereby helping to rescue us from our 'image problem.' This frankness is in some ways welcome, and Bod's important intervention has certainly enlivened the field, but it cannot be left unchallenged.

*Angus Nicholls is a guest at the ZfL (January to March 2018), sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. He teaches German and Comparative Literature at Queen Mary University of London, and co-edits the journal History of the Human Sciences.*

[1] Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), see especially pp. 1-2.

[2] Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Patterns and Principles from Antiquity to the Present*, translated by Lynn Richards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xiii. All further quotes in brackets.

[3] Rens Bod, Jaap Maat and Thijs Weststeijn, 'Introduction: The Making of the Modern Humanities', in: *The Making of the Humanities*, vol. 3, *The Modern Humanities*, ed. Rens Bod, Jaap Maat and Thijs Weststeijn (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), pp. 13-24 (here p. 13).

[4] Wilhelm Windelband, 'History and Natural Science' (Rectorial Address, Strasbourg, 1894), translated by Guy Oakes, *History and Theory* 19, no. 2 (1980): 169-85 (here p. 175).

[5] Windelband, 'History and Natural Science,' p. 181.

[6] Franco Moretti, ed., *Canon / Archive: Studies in Quantitative Formalism* (New York: n+1 Foundation, 2017), p. xiv.

[7] North, *Literary Criticism*, p. 35.

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