Verbalized Humanities: Should I stay or should I go?

The Clash said it first, the way only rock n' roll could say it:

> Should I stay or should I go?
> If I go there will be trouble
> If I stay there will be double

The public discussions on the future of humanities seem likewise to generally point in two opposing directions: Violently limit access to, and thus reduce spending on, the humanistic disciplines and let it retreat into itself (exile to the proverbial ivory tower), or concede the tow-pulling contest and simply join the side of direct application, with profit, effectivity and optimization as a primary goal. Either choice would seem to benefit at least one part of society, but ultimately it is not a choice that can be made: Choosing the former would mean forever cutting the ties to the very world humanistic thinking seeks to understand, and choosing the latter could mean abandoning the project of *understanding* the products of human endeavour altogether. Either way, it seems, all will be lost. Trouble or double. What to do?

Instead of negative division or exclusion, I want to shout to the world about humanities not as an institution or a specific pattern of thought or interest, but as a marriage of verbs resulting in *creation*. Aristotle differentiated between three basic activities, or verbs, which constituted human agency: theoria, praxis and poiesis. Theoria a verb expressed a contemplation, more specifically "to look at" the world. Praxis was the verb for action, the physical actions of free people, and finally poiesis was the act of producing, "making", creating. None of the three words are strangers in the modern world, and their roots are found in many aspects of western languages. What seems neglected though, is the interrelationship between the words, a neglect which could be posited to be the root of a humanities in general crisis. In my view, theoria and praxis stand on opposite sides, and in between them stands creation, poiesis. They work together: Praxis has nothing to act upon without theoria, and likewise theoria is mute and alone without praxis. The two together form the final verb of creation. What I am suggesting is that the humanities is, or should be, such a marriage between verbs, and as such, a mutually beneficial, creative relationship between worlds. But instead we are discussing surrender, exile, or seperation.

What I propose is a new structure of educating and exercising humanities, dividing the humanities according to theoria, praxis and poiesis. I would propose stealing from the discipline of physics, which already expertly and quite productively embodies the three Aristotelian verbs, with its stringent division and meeting of theory and experimentation, with creation as product. Consider the achievements of theoretical and experimental physics divided and in unison: A theoretical, violently abstract, layer of multiverses constituting all realities becomes CERN, and the Large Hadron Collider, an actual billion-dollar machine built and buried deep underground in Switzerland. How? Do they have more charismatic scientists? A horde of marketers and commercial promoters? The possibility of direct application of parallel universes? I simplify, of course, but already we should easily see why physics presents itself as an interesting and inspiring bridge between thought and action for the humanities. The main point of application in the humanities would be forcing an active co-dependency, symbiotism between abstract and actualized humanistic thinking. The theoreticians

mute and paralyzed without the mouth and the shaping hands of the experimentalists, and the experimentalists themselves hollow without the mass of theory. There would ideally be no need for choosing, and no possibility for favouritism. Weaken the one, and visibly weaken the other. A scientific janus-face, a marriage between ideography and nomothetics, between the individual and the collective. And so we might secure a passage between humanistic thinking and humanistic living.

As it would be between a loving affirmation between realms of the world, so it could be between academic individuals. Theoretical and experimental humanists could be paired up, working together as complementary teams formed and firmed throughout their education. The theoretician establishes a hypothesis and discusses it with the experimentalist partner, letting actual experience complement theoretical findings, and likewise, letting the fledging theory influence the experimentalist view of the world. And, conversely, the experimentalist may observe, experiment and achieve results, brought to the theoretician, where the theoretical thoughts would be impacted by the forces of action, and cohesion found in the forces of actions themselves through a theoretical understanding.

I will try a perhaps more tangible *example*, with my own field of study, one which most certainly struggles in the vise between theory and application, that of Comparative Literature. The example here is based on a literary education divided into an undergraduate and a graduate education: Undergraduate degrees could take on form much in the way of the American tradition, with its liberalistic approach of choice, and its mission of educating enlightened citizens rather than specialized academics. Alternatively, the European model (under which I myself study), with a more focused undergraduate study of a single field, that of literature. In other words, not necessarily the big change in structure. Then we reach the graduate level, where the well-informed, broadly enlightened student of literature is presented with two choices – go left or go right. If the student chooses right, she will be presented with curriculums from courses of high abstraction, theorization and philosophy. Not just of literature, or the traditional humanities, but from biology, anthropology, political science, mathematics and surely physics, all taught with the looming background of literature. In other words, a full on education in theoretical, abstract thinking, an antithesis of "work in the real world", the purposely trained scholar in the ivory (lookout)tower. Should the student however choose the left path, she could meet perhaps a strong focus on sociology of literature, anthropology of literature, psychology, pedagogy, organizational communication and leadership, training in the design of literary experiences, in the tradition of museums, libraries or even popular-event makers and coordinators. To sum up, a choice between literature through theoria or praxis.

During each semester, then, besides the theoretical or practical coursework, an independent project would require completion. This project would be completed in teams of two, a theoretical graduate student and an experimental graduate student. Teams of theoria and praxis, symbiotically using their trained expertise in theoretical and experimental literature striving *together* towards the project of creation, of poiesis. Ideally these teams would become academically intimate, later forming such teams in the exo-educational world as well: Working projects at private business and simultaneously having ties to the academic world, through a team-structure, cultivated perhaps since application for admission to the university. The theoretical humanist cultivates the contemplative and thoroughly researched part of business projects combined with ground research and personal academic interest, while the experimentalist benefits from solid theoretical groundwork and framing and still preserves a vital tie to a "real world"-humanism, with both empirical observation and experimental results sent back into a theoretical sphere.

It is in some way a radicalization of humanistic thinking. But should humanistic thinking, action and creation not reflect the cognitive patterns of the human mind in its best form possible? Exercise chaotic and intense curiosity in its most radicalized forms? Steal from all disciplines? Mutate methods without hesitation? *Melt* with the world? Humanities *should* be radicalization of thoughts and actions of free people in creation. Make spaces that attempt to visualize, smell, taste, touch, eat or drink, *experience* the humanities and its objects. Build a library which foregoes the antiquated function of storage unit and becomes an experience unit! Enter the front door, and find three pedestals with three books on them. Beyond each book is a corridor, a maze, a room, a journey, which seeks the book's world in a real world. Go left and eat and drink the cakes and teas of Proust, with detours of daring interpretations, read aloud or acted. Go right and stumble in the roar of whales and thundering seas of Melville, contemplate aloneness and the whale in a room full of quiet people. At interactive stations, cultivate or reject the whaling industry or the future ecology. Suddenly a doorway opens, from Melville to Proust, a physical realization of intertextuality, of experiences not quite the same, and yet connected. Or perhaps (even this, especially this) show me Heidegger's "dwelling on earth". Make me be there, here, with my body *and* mind! Let the mind be in the world, and let the world be in the mind. Shoutingly, with *humanistic verbaciousness*, tear down the walls between thought and action, between art installations, art actions, art experiences and art thinking.

The answer to the conundrum posited by The Clash is two-fold, and perhaps paradoxical – humanities must remove itself from its own hidden world and also entrench itself further in it. Accept neither choice of troubles, and perhaps thereby thrice the trouble, but for all the more gain. Here then, a theoretical thought (although a roughly sketched and rudely shouted one), waiting for the experimentalists shaping hands, joining in some new, exciting, potentially chaotic, potentially fun creation. What I in the end want to shout out wherever is this: Humanities is not an antiquated way of thinking useless things, nor is it a blunt tool to hammer out profits in the world. It is a multifaceted vibrant *verb*, denoting both deep contemplation, free action and wonderful creation in unison – we just need to use it that way.