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Report to the Council

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Those of you who attended last year's Annual Meeting may recall that I opened my report with an Emily Dickinson poem that I happened to see on a New York City subway poster, "I stepped from plank to plank," which evoked so graphically my first years on the job. This year I would like to share with you an e-mail that recently arrived in my mailbox. If you are a regular customer of Amazon.com you have probably received notices generated by their "social preference software." This is the rather surprising message I received a few weeks ago:

Hi, Pauline,

We've noticed that customers who have purchased books by Lao Tzu often purchased books by Confucius. For this reason you might like to know that Confucius's newest book, *The Essential Analects: Selected Passages With Traditional Commentary*, will be released soon. You can pre-order your copy by following the link below.

So, Confucius has a new book! Think of the intriguing possibilities this gives rise to – "On the next *Oprah*, Confucius joins us to talk about the new edition of his best-selling but controversial *Analects*. He'll also share his new program: 'Up with Filial Piety in Eight Easy Steps.' Don't miss it!"

It's easy to make fun of Amazon and of how software algorithms sometimes come up with unanticipated responses, an experience endemic to Googling. But there is also something charming and powerful in Amazon's offer. See how accessible the distant past has become! Elements of the human cultural record have been normalized and categorized and are now readily retrievable by just about anyone. At Amazon, that normalization is fairly crude and limited – all metadata come down to whether a "book" is "new" or not – but it is not hard to imagine how an only slightly more nuanced categorization could be in fact quite useful to scholars and readers in general.

The transforming power of digital technologies also drives the changes that pundits like Thomas Friedman suggest is producing a "flat" world, where the new permeability of borders and rapid transit of information and capital create a more level playing field for the educated and ambitious, regardless of the cover of their passports. Whatever you think of Friedman's

prognosis of economic convergence, there is no question that changes in the world order have intensified the mandate of scholarship, especially humanistic scholarship, to understand and to interpret a world where the confluence of cultures makes differences more immanent. And so we in turn should ask what structures we need, what steps we must take to address that mandate.

A similar concern for designing structures for global scholarship led to the founding of ACLS 87 years ago. (A story I have told many times, because it bears retelling.) After World War I, the British Academy sought to build a new international union of national academies, in the wake of the failure of the politicians to create a League of Nations. But who should represent the U.S. in this new union? Lord Bryce, the distinguished scholar and former British ambassador to the U.S., posed that question to his friend, J. Franklin Jameson of The Library of Congress. Should we invite the American Academy of Arts and Sciences or the American Philosophical Society? No, replied Jameson, those selective organizations were “aristocratic,” and not in keeping with the democratic ethos of our nation. Better, Jameson advised, to form a new federation of professional scholarly societies, organizations dedicated to the advancement of learning but open and inclusive in their membership. ACLS began with 13 societies and now proudly includes 68 (and, *pace* Steven Marcus, in the most recent *Daedalus*, no societies “seceded” from ACLS to form the Social Science Research Council)¹.

I will return to questions of international scholarship, but let me underline now how Jameson’s response highlights key characteristics of the modern American learned society. It is voluntary in its membership and leadership; it is open and inclusive. It is dedicated above all to knowledge *qua* knowledge in research, teaching, and practice. This formula has proven remarkably durable and scalable, that is, capable of growth. As the higher education enterprise grew in the U.S. and especially as doctoral and professional education spread beyond a few elite institutions, the learned societies were a critical means of establishing standards and of creating truly national professional disciplines.

But this organizational formula is not without its vulnerabilities. If leadership is voluntary, how can societies be stable and improve? How can they sustain leadership? These questions point to another reason that ACLS was founded, the second half of our mission: “to strengthen and maintain relations among national societies dedicated to [humanistic] studies.” This is a core activity that takes several forms. This annual meeting is one such instance and focuses this year not just on strengthening relations among societies, but on the connections among all sectors of the academic humanities: learned societies, college and university leadership, humanities centers, and funders.

Another site for this work is the annual leadership orientation ACLS has begun hosting for new presidents of our societies. This seminar allows administrative officers and incoming presidents to meet as group with a consultant/researcher on the leadership and management of non-profit organizations and has been found, I think, to be very valuable.

Yet a third site of this work is our Conference of Administrative Officers. The CAO are now preparing for a retreat in 2007 that will consider the dynamic relation of the structures of learned societies to the intellectual and methodological changes those societies seek to nurture. We

¹ Steven Marcus, “Humanities from classics to cultural studies: notes toward the history of an idea,” *Daedalus*, 135:2 (2006) 18.

expect this conference to be a productive one, and I hope that delegates and society presidents will join with their executive directors in preparations for the retreat.

The first half of the ACLS mission is “to advance humanistic studies in all fields of the humanities and social sciences.” Material prepared for this meeting included announcements of four ACLS initiatives that address this aspect of our mission. Let me speak briefly about each, emphasizing the principles they seek to enact.

This first announcement is headed “Higher Stipends/More Fellowships.” ACLS has reached a significant milestone in our fellowships campaign. In the 2006-07 competition, we will offer 65 fellowships funded from our endowment, an 8% increase from 60, and we will raise the stipends for fellowships awarded to full professors to \$60,000 for an academic year, up by 20% from \$50,000. We can do this because of the generosity of donors to our fellowship campaign, and the effectiveness with which our investment committee has managed those donations and the whole endowment. This campaign, you may recall, began in 1997 when John D’Arms established the goal of doubling our fellowships endowment and more than doubling the amount of fellowship stipends to be awarded. In 2000, John enlarged our goals. He invited a consortium of research universities, now 31 in number, to contribute to the ACLS fellowship campaign so that we could be sure that our fellowship stipends would keep pace with increases in faculty salaries. We hope to follow the announced increase in awards for full professors with similar increases at other ranks, and, indeed, to continue raising all stipends.

Our aim here is not just to aid individual scholars who present a record of past accomplishment and the promise of future achievement, although that is surely a good thing. We also believe that a robust ACLS Fellowship Program reinforces two critical dimensions of the American system for supporting scholarly research. First, it is a national system that must be sustained. We should never forget that the greatest support from humanities research comes not from the federal government, not from foundations, but from colleges and universities themselves, when they provide leaves to their faculty. (That fact, I would note, is one reason why we felt it so important to partner with the Association of American Universities as they focused on the humanities.) The primacy of local decision-making is consistent with the decentralized nature of our academy. In this framework, national support structures become particularly important both for their signaling effect and for their ability to leverage local resources. It is therefore crucial that ACLS fellowship awards carry both the normative and the financial weight sufficient to their task.

The normative value of ACLS fellowships derives, quite simply, from the rigorous peer-review that determines the selection of awardees. This is the second salient dimension of our programs: upholding the principle of scholarly self-governance. Neither the ACLS Board, nor its Council, nor its staff, nor its president, selects our fellows. It is thanks to the dedication and citizenship of the many scholars who serve as reviewers that we can point to our roster of awardees as the product of a community of judgment applying critical standards of scholarship without reference to external pressures. At last year’s annual meeting, I spoke of the conditions and principles of academic freedom today. Our fellowship programs are the quintessential enactment of those principles. We can all rejoice, therefore, that thanks to the growth of our core, endowment-funded Fellowship Program and the addition of some of the other initiatives I will soon describe, next year ACLS will distribute approximately \$8.6 million to the support of individual

researchers in the humanities and related social sciences in the U.S. Ten years ago that figure was around \$1.3 million.

The announcement of a promising new program, the Mellon/ACLS Early Career Fellowships, is a major element of this increase. This sizeable new venture is a logical extension of our existing mechanisms of support to the world of graduate education, and one more attempt to address critical issues in the infrastructure of the humanities. The program will have two related components: an open competition for dissertation fellowships and a more restricted one to recent recipients of the Ph.D. Each independently addresses real needs at discrete early stages of the academic career. The incentive effect of their articulation, we hope, will help model patterns of professional development that will reduce both uncertainties for individuals and inefficiencies, fix the system as a whole and promote excellence as well.

I hope you will join me in extending gratitude to The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, not just for their generous support of this new venture, but for their partnership with the academic community and with ACLS specifically in thinking through the design of effective programs. As I am sure you know, the Mellon Foundation has for many years made the health of doctoral education in the humanities one of its chief concerns. Their longstanding program to fund entering graduate students established important new patterns for university support of the first years of doctoral study. After careful research, analysis, and consultation, Mellon decided to redirect their attention toward the latter years of graduate school, when funding practices are more haphazard and often contingent on burdensome teaching obligations. I know I speak for my colleagues on the ACLS staff when I say that our consultations with the Foundation in developing the proposal for this new program were characterized by helpfulness, care, deep knowledge, and consistent high-mindedness on the part of our Mellon partners.

We also have announced the second round of a program begun this year, the Digital Innovation Fellowships. We undertook this initiative with the conviction that digital technologies empower scholarship. If that were not so, scholars would not use them so readily. In 1980, an ACLS survey of nearly 4,000 scholars in the humanities and social sciences found that only two percent of respondents had a computer for their exclusive use. If that question were asked today, the numbers would certainly be reversed. As computing power and speed increase, and as the number of digital collections such as JSTOR grows, scholars in the humanities are evermore at their keyboards.

It is clear that for a growing number of scholars, digital technologies are the essential means of both producing and presenting new knowledge. Even so, the presence of digital technology in the humanities has not yet been *systematically* exploited. We can move to a more systematic approach by providing frameworks – that is, an infrastructure – within which dispersed energy and nascent efforts can be aggregated. The ACLS Commission whose work is almost done will recommend several measures to build a cyberinfrastructure for the humanities and social sciences. One simple step will be to establish a national fellowship program for digital scholarship in the humanities. Such a program can identify and celebrate excellence in scholarship and identify digital scholarship with that excellence. Let me underscore that point: we aim to support scholarly excellence that is also digital scholarship, not just the technologically best digital projects.

The response to our first call for applications vindicated our assumption of a pent-up demand for this sort of support. One hundred fourteen completed applications were submitted for the five fellowships available, resulting in the toughest odds of all of our competitions at 23:1.

Having emphasized the importance of peer review a few moments ago, I should note that evaluation of work in the digital area introduces interesting new elements into that process. Most peer-review in the humanities is focused on the articulation of topics as much as on the design of projects. That is, selection panels judge the intellectual importance of the subject to be researched and the coherence of the applicant's conceptualization of that subject. Evaluations of digital research proposals must also give consideration to the particular requirements of designing a platform for research and, perhaps, to developing the teamwork and collaborative structures absent from most solo-humanist work. New standards of judgment and evaluation criteria will certainly develop within a special selection committee focused on the intersection of technology and humanistic knowledge.

The fourth announcement is a call for applications to our new Program in East Asian Archaeology and Early History. This program represents a partnership with the Henry Luce Foundation, which will make institutional awards under this heading, while ACLS focuses on the support of individuals. Let me note that our partnership with the Luce Foundation exhibits every positive characteristic I noted concerning our cooperation with the Mellon Foundation.

There is great urgency behind this program, deriving from the impact of galloping economic development in China and East Asia generally on archaeological sites of considerable importance, which are now threatened by development (and outright theft). Without concerted attention to assess and protect the sites and artifacts being uncovered at a breathtaking rate, we will miss the only moment when we can authenticate invaluable data about several of the world's oldest continuing civilizations.

This work is of both intellectual and political consequence. The interpretations of recent discoveries are forcing reconceptualizations of Chinese history and identity at a moment when the Chinese leadership is tying itself to an idealized continuity of the ancient Chinese state. But there is also an intellectual imperative of global significance. In too many cases, scholars have developed their generalizations about the formative patterns of early human culture from knowledge grounded exclusively in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. As our knowledge of ancient East Asia grows, it will invite a more comparative and global study of the distant human past, study that will give us a more fully developed understanding of human civilization.

The Luce project aims to promote new forms of partnerships among communities of scholars – whether as formal collaborative research, training programs or field work. This brings us back to the subject I mentioned at the beginning of my report: the mandate of the humanities in a – choose your adjective – internationalized, transnationalized, globalized, glocalized, multi-cultural, intercultural – world. What are the structures, content, and aims of a scholarship that crosses national boundaries? We hope, of course, that all scholarship does. We hold out as an abstract but nonetheless worthy goal that knowledge should be borderless. We also know, however, that knowledge is also deeply conditioned by the structures that have nurtured it.

This dialectic came home to me as I wrote a brief history of my own field of comparative literature for this spring's issue of *Daedalus*, a volume that is part of the Humanities Initiative of

the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. No doubt like all disciplines, comp lit has mirrored the shifting political climate and intellectual predilections of one age after the next. It has oscillated, for example, between a commitment to universalism or cosmopolitanism on the one hand and, on the other, a somewhat mechanical study of international transmission of styles that still keeps “nations” as the independent variable. And this tension between the cosmopolitan and the national has been only one of many contests played out on the field of comparative literature.

For me, two particular aspects of the history I traced are particularly relevant to the past, present and future of the humanities at large. The first is comparative literature’s incessant anxieties and continuing flirtation with crisis, its constant questioning of its enterprise (and even its name) and insistence on engaging in “a critique that seeks to sustain the limits within which it operates.” Indeed, as one scholar has noted, comparative literature has thus become “a theoretical account of the humanities in general.”² But this, I maintain, is not a problem: these are virtues all too rare in society today. In that relentless questioning of aims and contexts resides, after all, one of the most important strengths of all the humanistic disciplines, and one we should embrace.

A second distinctive feature of comparative literature’s disciplinary history is its association with scholars who share a personal history of emigration, if not exile. This fact only magnifies for me the necessity of maintaining the American university’s historical openness to students, faculty and visitors from abroad. There has certainly never been an American academy that was not, in fact, international in crucial dimensions. The modern American university developed out of a mixture of English and German models of higher education, and most historians credit the corps of Americans with German Ph.D.s as the sparkplugs of the process. Later, the migration of refugee scholars fleeing European totalitarianisms transformed not just comparative literature, but countless other fields in the humanities and social sciences as well. In the long aftermath of 9/11, we must ask: will future intellectual developments be determined, or retarded, by the decisions or inaction of overburdened consular officers in our embassies abroad? How can we develop new and flexible means of global scholarly cooperation and communication?

Our various international congresses, conferences and study centers play an important role here. The International Academic Union, the reason ACLS exists, continues at its stately pace. But much of the apparatus of international scholarship was conceived and nurtured as a means of state-to-state public diplomacy that maps unevenly onto the realities of academic life. The history of modern China studies provides a case in point. By the mid-1980s, Chinese students who had been introduced to “traveling theory” had begun to populate East Asian and comparative literature programs in the U.S. and almost immediately proceeded to transform the study of modern Chinese literature here. By 1990, a major conference at Duke University on contemporary Chinese politics and culture could take place that was completely organized by the first generation of these immigrants. But – here’s the rub – our traditional means of academic exchange, such as Fulbright, were reluctant to fund research in China by these promising young scholars. The Fulbright program is self-consciously “bi-lateral”: to make those structures work you have to be on one side or the other. But the sort of scholars and intellectuals we want to nurture in the future will be from both, or several sides. How can we design structures that promote a pluralist internationalism?

² David Ferris, “Indiscipline,” 2003 ACLA draft report manuscript, 2, 11 as cited in Pauline Yu, “Comparative Literature in Question,” *Daedalus* 135:2 (2006) 53.

We try to move in that direction at ACLS. While most of our support does target scholars based at US institutions, we are considering removing citizenship requirements from those programs where donors do not require them. The new Early Career Dissertation Fellowships I mentioned earlier will be open to non-citizens at U.S. institutions. Many residential centers outside the US are already included as destinations for our Burkhardt Fellowship Program. Last year, our international programs provided \$1.5 million in 120 grants and fellowships to scholars based overseas. The humanities need what the world can offer.

And the world needs what the humanities can offer. The best support for that assertion can be found in the new book by our newly elected chair, Kwame Anthony Appiah, entitled *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Appiah is concerned with what obligations we have to those whose culture, language, beliefs and values may seem significantly different from our own, but with whom we are connected ever more closely by the plural phenomena we inadequately denote by the term “globalization.” Those responsibilities include, most basically, being aware that our actions as citizens and consumers have consequences for the well-being of individuals around the world. But attending to material concerns is just one obligation, Appiah writes. We also need to be concerned, to be affirmatively concerned, with what makes life meaningful: the culture, language, beliefs and values that may seem significantly different from – even contradictory – to our own. The ethic of cosmopolitanism that he proposes provides a path between, on the one hand, a totalizing universalism that elides or eradicates difference and, on the other, a promiscuous relativism that denies any fixed values. As he puts it, “Cosmopolitans suppose that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation. But they don’t suppose, like some universalists, that we could all come to agreement if only we had the same vocabulary.” Indeed, he notes that “[w]e enter every conversation – whether with neighbors or with strangers – without a promise of final agreement.” And he stresses the importance of “fallibilism, the sense that our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence”.³

We in the humanities can be proud to be both cosmopolitan and fallible. What we do, in very great part, is debate our naturally quite different views on the subjects to which we have dedicated our professional lives. For scholars in the humanities, that work concerns the most intimate elements of human experience: thoughts, ideals, emotions, creativity, what Howard Mumford Jones back in 1959 described as “the something or somebody neither the doctor nor the sociologist can quite get at.”⁴ It is also in the humanities that we can imagine and come to know something or somebody quite different, other, elsewhere. And if there’s one thing I know that we can agree on, it is that ACLS must and will continue to support the best of humanistic scholarship, in and of the world. Thank you.

³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006) 57, 44, 144.

⁴ Howard Mumford Jones, *One Great Society: Humane Learning in the United States* (New York: Harcourt; Brace, 1959) 10.