

{Au: Please supply a brief biographical note (100 words or fewer). Here are two samples you can use as models.}

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Bruce Robbins

Dead Wood: Academic Freedom and Smart People

Those who have seen the 2008 crop of movies featuring academics, like Smart People and The Visitor, may have noticed a pattern. The academic, a middle-aged man, is a painful illustration of what is called dead wood. He is professionally unproductive and has been for some time. It's not just that he has stopped doing publishable research; he's also dead inside, spiritually dead, emotionally frozen. Naturally enough, he is also less than a perfect pleasure to live with for his students and colleagues. In each case, the grumpy, melancholic protagonist is eventually awakened and liberated by contact with characters from far outside the academy – a former student and a zany ne'er-do-well brother in Smart People and undocumented immigrants in The Visitor.¹

These films deviate slightly but interestingly from the canonical portrait of the middle-aged male academic sketched out by William Deresiewicz in a 2007 essay.

According to Deresiewicz{Au: Suggested by editor.}: "In The Squid and the Whale

(2005), Jeff Daniels plays an English professor and failed writer who sleeps with his students, neglects his wife, and bullies his children. In One True Thing (1998), William Hurt plays an English professor and failed writer who sleeps with his students, neglects his wife, and bullies his children."² Michael Douglas in Wonder Boys (2000) provides Deresiewicz with an almost identical example. If this is the rule, the 2008 films are exceptional enough to look like a deliberate refutation. Again the professor is crabby, misanthropic, affectively stunted. But this time he has an excuse. In both films, we're told right up front that the professor is acting the way he is because his wife has died, and he's in mourning for her. The film presents this mourning as excessive or at least excessively prolonged, but it's certainly not unnatural or repugnant.

It seems worth speculating (assuming anything can be concluded from so small a sample) as to the possible larger significance of this revisionist portrait. My speculation is that the dead wives are Hollywood's figure for the subject matter of the humanities.³ That is, they're a figure for art and ideas that in the public's eyes are genuinely beautiful and worthy to be adored, as we academic humanists adore them, but that are also lost forever. By this theory, Hollywood would supply the dead-wood professors with dead wives in a surprisingly good-faith attempt to penetrate the mystery of what it is that humanists do, and the answer would be: the remembering of beloved but now distant things. These films would thus be critical but not entirely unsympathetic allegories of the humanities as seen from without, and what the public would be critical of, but also somewhat sympathetic to, would be a reverential attitude toward the past that turns professors into harsh critics of the present.

The English professor in Smart People (played by Dennis Quaid) complains that the students these days are only passionate about getting As. He writes a book called You Can't Read! and his editor comments that the book itself is a bully. There's not much about the society around him that he looks on with approval. He is a compulsive criticizer – compelled into perpetual criticism, one might say, by the very rationale of the humanities. This could be Hollywood stereotyping, but the Quaid figure is a type that I for one do not find completely unfamiliar, and the argument itself seems worth trying on for size. People in the humanities, so the film would be saying, are overinvested in the past. They can't help it; it's who they are, it's their reason for being. And in a sense they're right: the wives we see in the photos seem perfect, charming, loving, beautiful. To say that humanists reject the world around them because of their love for dead wives is to say that they are right to care about preserving the beautiful works and artifacts of the past, which are indeed worthy of being loved. But they carry this entirely understandable love too far. Though the past they preserve is worthy of being preserved, the moral would be that they cling to it too tightly – so tightly that it stops them from loving again, stops them from finding new objects of love in the present, and turns them into overcritical bullies. So the standpoint of the present must finally prevail – a standpoint that is radically **{Au: Suggested by editor.}** more forgiving.

This cinematic argument over the rationale of the humanities is relevant to the topic of academic freedom in several devious but, I think, important ways. It matters, first and foremost, because academic freedom depends on the goodwill of the general moviegoing public, and it is that goodwill that the films are renegotiating. The

protection academic freedom offers is a recent and precarious achievement. It is not a right written into the U.S. Constitution, like the freedom of speech, with which it is often confused. It had to be won, and since 1915, it has had to be defended again and again in the court of public opinion. (Whether other, more formal rights are finally more guaranteed without also being seized and struggled for is an open question.) This defense is all the more difficult because academic freedom is not a democratic right. It is a privilege accorded only to faculty, not to all citizens or even all members of the so-called academic community, for instance, students. Students seem a bit stunned when informed that they do not actually enjoy academic freedom. But the fact is that this privilege is very restricted, and that is its frailty. In order for academic freedom to function, society must agree to allow professional experts to govern, more or less without interference, the way knowledge is produced and disseminated in their areas of expertise. This agreement cannot be taken for granted.⁴ The difficulty is not just that academic positions diverging from the mainstream on issues of strong public concern are always capable of making the public hesitate in its generous commitment to keep its hands off. Trouble can also reliably be expected as a result of the American society's deep suspicion of expertise as such and the authority accorded it, a suspicion that academic experts tend to share and even sometimes to augment. Expertise is of course undemocratically distributed, and so is the job security that it gives access to, at least in the academy. The Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, and Anglican church leaders who have boldly proposed divestment from Israel, on the model of divestment from South Africa in the 1980s, have stood at greater risk of losing their positions, should their

initiatives fail, than tenured professors proposing the same thing.

When and if it works, then, academic freedom is a very special, very exclusive sort of protection. Its exclusivity puts it at a political disadvantage. Those who can be fired from their jobs at will, which is to say a large proportion of American citizens and residents, cannot be expected to feel unalloyed delight when they contemplate the attachment of academic freedom to tenure – and this is of course the only situation in which academic freedom can be said genuinely to exist. (If you can be fired at will, you do not have academic freedom.) Why should they rush to champion those who benefit from a job security that they themselves do not enjoy? On the contrary, there must be a strong temptation to make common cause with the ideological forces of corporatization and “flexibility.” Shouldn’t everyone be equally insecure? Doesn’t insecurity ensure progress and profit? Shouldn’t dead wood be pruned?

Smart People has nothing direct to say on the subject of academic freedom, but it brings together just this set of questions around its hypercritical dead-wood protagonist. It’s not one eccentric individual but the whole profession that looks from the outside like dead wood, ripe for the cost-cutting ax. The expression dead wood pops up again and again in the case against tenure. Take away tenure, and academic freedom collapses.

When Smart People connects dead wood, concern for the past, and (perhaps excessive, perhaps pathological) critique of the present, it suggests another weakness in the public legitimation of academic freedom. Defenders of academic freedom often point, rightly enough, to the enormous business success of the American university,

which draws tuition-paying students from around the world, as well as to its scholarly accomplishments. But the accomplishments pointed out are usually those of the natural sciences. The accomplishments of the social sciences and humanities are harder to describe and harder to make the public see the value of. Yet natural scientists are not the faculty members whose academic freedom most often needs defending. They may operate according to beliefs about the natural world that are anathema to large numbers of Americans: for example, that evolution is not “just a theory,” or more generally that the world works without any supernatural purpose or intervention. But it’s only rarely that academic freedom issues are raised having to do with the routine performance of scientific research or teaching at the university level. (The case of Sami Al-Arian, a computer scientist, had to do with his extramural activities.) In the humanities and social sciences, on the other hand, it is precisely what scholars say and do in their areas of disciplinary expertise and in the normal performance of their duties that is targeted. If academic freedom is to be defended more successfully, the public will have to acquire a more accurate and more favorable idea than it now has of what it is that social scientists and humanists achieve.⁵ Smart People, we might say, {**Au: Suggested by editor.**} is quietly wrestling with just this problem.

The film doesn’t get a lot of help in this from academic culture itself. It’s not clear that if a gun were put to the head of the average humanist or social scientist, she or he would be instantly able to come up with a version of our activities that is more publicly plausible than the logic linking extremely critical or putatively antisocial views (the sort that lead scholars to require the protection of academic freedom) to dead wives. If the

very idea of achievement in the humanities and social sciences is a bit vague in the public's mind, it's probably because, to be honest, it's also vague in the mind of most professors in the humanities and social sciences. It's not really how we think.

In its mild confusion about the nature of scholarly achievement in the humanities, Smart People is in fact interestingly symptomatic. The film hesitates before the question of whether its protagonist has finally produced something of value or not. Is he really dead wood, as he initially seems? What is productive research in the humanities? We observe the Quaid figure vainly struggling to interest publishers in the book he has apparently been working on forever. They don't return his phone calls. Surrounded as it is by his socially dysfunctional mode of being, the failure to publish looks like more of the same dysfunction. Then suddenly the book is accepted, and by a very prestigious publisher, and it is accepted precisely because it is so socially dysfunctional, so uncompromisingly negative. He appears after all to have "produced." What, then, is the moral of this productivity? It suddenly looks as if a misanthropic, maladjusted anger – **{Au: Suggested by editor.}** strong criticism of the present – might not after all define blockage and failure in the humanities but on the contrary might be the royal road to success in the humanities. Maybe it is even the very essence of the humanities, at least as seen from the outside. **{Au: Editor asks if a little more can be said about this.}** This is an ambiguity that the film can't quite figure out what to do with, perhaps because we can't either. In the end the protagonist is reconciled to the world again, but he does not cancel the book's publication, though repudiating the book is what the logic of his change of heart would seem to dictate. In a sense, despite all

appearances, the book already is reconciled to the world, reconciled in the normal mode that the humanities have negotiated for themselves. We carp and bully, perhaps out of reverence for the beloved lost things that we know about and society doesn't. Society grins and bears it.

But this unacknowledged deal between the humanities and society, a deal that both parties tend most commonly (if a bit misleadingly) to think of as a commitment to "culture," is by no means binding on either party. And when the carping and bullying get too fierce, as they sometimes do—for example, when Ward Churchill talks about little Eichmanns in the World Trade Center or when Norman Finkelstein draws attention to the Holocaust industry and its effects on the Palestinians—society may well decide that this is really too much to bear. That's when academic freedom is on the line and when it can fail, as it arguably did (though the circumstances were complex) in the recent cases of Churchill and Finkelstein. These failures suggest that it might be desirable to negotiate, if we can, a better deal. Such a deal would involve creating a climate of opinion in which, without necessarily agreeing with either Finkelstein or Churchill, the general public would be able to make sense of their statements rather than considering them lunatic provocations that may or may not deserve formal immunity from society's just and rational rage.

{Au: Suggested by editor.} Academic freedom needs to be defended in the public sphere, and **{Au: Suggested by editor.}** its defense requires the ability to make a public case for the sort of social criticism that we collectively perform—criticism that will often look to the society around us like mere collective grumpiness. Other narratives or

strategies of legitimation, each either confirming or demanding some change in what we do, are of course possible. The point is that it is necessary{Au: Suggested by editor.} to come up with some such strategy or narrative. If the story of the dead-wood professor in mourning for his dead wife does not represent you to your full satisfaction – and there are various reasons beyond the obvious fact of gender why it might not – that doesn't let you off the hook. Some story is needed. It is needed in order to address the element of paradox that surrounds, to various degrees, the academic Left (which is most likely to need the protection of academic freedom), the humanities as a whole, and the university as an institution. What we do comes down to telling society things that much of society doesn't really want to hear, and making society like it.

The danger in not thinking about academic freedom in this way is that people will feel about us academics the way ordinary New Yorkers feel about diplomats who can park anywhere they want because they don't have to worry about getting parking tickets. Academic freedom can easily be made to look like a form of diplomatic immunity, allowing us to say anything we please behind our walls, no matter how crazy. The further implication is that people are regularly saying some pretty crazy and otherwise indefensible things behind our walls and even that crazy and indefensible things are our norm. All of this weakens the walls, naturally enough, by making them a target for scorn or righteous indignation. The alternative I am recommending is to abandon the illusion that the walls themselves can protect us and instead sally out to do intellectual battle in the open. This means fighting it out on the particular commitments that cause the most friction between the university and public opinion in general, like

secularism and internationalism.

This will take us out of our comfort zone. That zone has been demarcated, not ungenerously, by a definition of the humanities in terms of a relation to the past – most famously, as the preservation and transmission of the best that has been known and thought. The authority to speak for the past has given humanists a certain critical leverage against the present, a sort of collective, structural rebelliousness that overrides and shapes the enthusiasms and commitments of the profession’s individual members. By the same token, however, this orientation to the greatness of the past has also confined our rebelliousness within certain more or less socially acceptable limits. It’s hard to gauge where exactly these limits are, though the Churchill and Finkelstein cases suggest that they may be set largely by nationalism, American and Israeli. In any event, the refusal of humanists to join the patriotic chorus after 9/11, the growing campus protest against unconditional U.S. support for Israel that has followed the Gaza invasion of 2008–9, the self-rescuing solidarity with undocumented immigrants that inspires the plot of The Visitor – these are signs that some (narrow){**Au: Suggested by editor.**} national limits have been outgrown. It’s the freedom to think outside and against the pressures of national loyalty, a freedom that has already been tested in any number of academic freedom cases and is sure to be tested further in the present economic crisis, that can only really be defended by winning over sections of public opinion situated at some distance from the academy’s walls.

This is not to say that academic freedom is worth defending at all costs. The concept is tricky, for example, in the context of campaigns against the Israeli version of

apartheid, which are ongoing as I write (early March 2009). Academic freedom was invoked against such campaigns when they were directed against apartheid-era South Africa in the 1980s. It was objected that divestment would harm progressive white South African academics. The same argument is made in defense of Israeli academics now. (No mention is made of the many Israelis whom I've heard say, "Please, boycott me!") The policy of the American Association of University Professors, an admirable organization that does deeply valuable work in defense of academic freedom, has been to present boycotts and academic freedom as antithetical. For those like myself who think boycotts and divestment, if well defined, are legitimate forms of political action, especially in the case of a rogue state like Israel that could not mistreat its population as it does without the heroic efforts of the American taxpayer, there have to be doubts about the concept of academic freedom, at least as it is currently understood.

It would certainly be a minor victory if those who mentioned academic freedom in the Israel-Palestine context were obliged to remember the academic freedom of the Palestinians. Palestinian faculty members and students are systematically denied visas, harassed at checkpoints, denied passage from Gaza to the universities of the West Bank, and kept from performing their duties by a hundred other restrictions of their movement, not to speak of having their institutions arbitrarily closed down or simply bombed and destroyed (as was the case of the Islamic University of Gaza in December 2008). Surely these facts take something away from the force of academic freedom as an argument against divestment.

Yet here, too, the concept lends itself to misunderstanding. As I've said, faculty

enjoy academic freedom, but students do not. When students have their laboratories bombed, when they are held up at checkpoints and kept from attending class, it is their human rights that are violated, not their academic freedom. They are being denied their right to an education. When the Israelis damaged or destroyed sixty-six schools during the assault on Gaza in the winter of 2008–9, killing any number of students and other children, most of those schools were not institutions of higher learning where academic freedom applies. The proper vocabulary in this case is that of human rights, a vocabulary that makes no special place for the university.

Still, those of us who want to direct our energies to the university in particular need not feel that we do so against a totally hostile and uncomprehending world. That was one reason why I began this essay with Smart People. After all, the film makes a rather remarkable effort to find an objective correlative, as it were, for the work of the humanities and one that general audiences will be forced into some sympathy with. I have in fact underplayed the film's cordiality toward the humanities. Of course it satirizes its dead-wood protagonist, but it also gives him a certain verbal charm. To be more precise, it allows the audience to enjoy the wicked entertainment value of his lines even while diagnosing his misanthropy as a symptom of emotional blockage. Formally speaking, the entertainment value is a shameless plug. You can think of it as a sort of product placement for a humanities education. It suggests that communication between inside and outside the academy is not as hopeless as it may sometimes seem.

At the end of Smart People, we see a rejuvenated, more affable, more humane professor on the first day of the next semester. This time he is showing a sincere interest

in his students. He asks one his name, then asks “Where are you from?” If we imagine cultural studies as another formation for the humanities, overlapping significantly with the older version but also shifting its center away from past and toward the present, then the question “Where are you from?” addressed to a student could stand as a sort of motto for it. Students, like their teachers, are now frequently from outside the borders of the United States. The student present is a richer present, a present in which more pasts have to be counted in, mourned, loved, and also hated. Students, who are both inside and outside the academy, are not the worst place to begin the work of legitimation.

Notes

1. Smart People, directed by Noam Murro (New York: Miramax, 2008); The Visitor, directed by Thomas McCarthy (Los Angeles: Overture Films, 2008).
2. William Deresiewicz, “Love on Campus,” The American Scholar (Summer 2007): XX-XX. **{Au: Please provide page numbers.}**
3. I’m cheating slightly here: The Visitor, which is by far the better film, features a professor who does third world development rather than nineteenth-century literature. But it seems to me that the undeveloped or underdeveloped third world plays much the same role in this film as great literary works do in the other. Distance in space is like distance in time: in both cases, the dead wife stands for an investment in the distant or absent that stops the survivor from investing in what’s in front of him here and now.
4. This is the easy answer to Stanley Fish’s vision of an autonomous, self-sufficient

academy that would have no special need for academic freedom, as in Save the World on Your Own Time (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

5. I argue this case at greater length in “Outside Pressures,” Works and Days 51–54 (2008–9): 339–45.