

Director's Letter

The Humanities in the Postliterate Era

Once again I am grateful for the opportunity to reach out to you, the readers of this *Bulletin*—in the University, the city and beyond. In the *Bulletin* you will once again find evidence of our continued efforts to study and act on the fourfold mandate of the Institute: to offer programs and projects under the headings of Violence and its Alternatives, Human Rights and Democratic Development, the Humanities and Culture, and Community Education. Together they comprise a stretching combination of concerns held together by a “public-sphere and public-service critical model,” which is how I described our self-understanding in last year's *Bulletin*.

Two gleanings from the newspapers (remember them?) give pointed urgency to what the Institute attempts to do.

First gleaning. In a recent *Globe and Mail* article (“Curious George and the postliterate” by Ray Conlogue: 21 November 2002, R3) the author describes a recent conference at York University in Toronto at which “Curious” George Steiner, Susan Sontag, Camille Paglia and Jean Baudrillard were all speakers (think of it—you don't have to want to have been there, or even to like any or all of the speakers named, to recognize the voltage of such a conference). Their common position, according to Conlogue, was one that “believes that the catastrophic forgetfulness that has overtaken the West since the Second World War is a sign that the print culture that sustained us for six centuries is actually dying,” that although many can read computer manuals, very few will “have either the wish or the will to read *The Iliad*”—which Steiner, at the age of eight, read with his father in the original Greek.

This position was supported by an interview with Steiner in which, among other predictions, he posits the death of the value of the transcendent as a result of the longterm effects of modernity, particularly technology (and see, in relation to this point, the article by Richard Lee from our 2002 Joanne Brown Symposium on Violence on the theme of technology and violence). And, of course, behind the six centuries of print culture to which the article refers, stand centuries of writing on stone, metals, papyrus, parchments and vellum, which stand under even more serious threat than print.

Second gleaning. A surprisingly supportive editorial in *The Vancouver Sun* (27 November 2002, A22) on the subject of SFU's new approach to the undergraduate curriculum which emphasizes writing, mathematics and the importance of studies outside the students' areas of specialty. In what the editorial calls a “sage” decision, it describes how the new program “will focus on written communications and on critical thinking and problem solving—crucial skills for students in any field”—yes, and skills long and regularly emphasized by the Humanities Department to which we belong. The editorial goes on to affirm the connection between these skills, the development of intellect and imagination, and the participation of free and informed citizens in the public sphere.

Two recent comments, then, among hundreds or thousands which might be cited: the first, a virtual death knell for the humanities in so far as they are communicated through print media; the second, an affirmation of support for a new curriculum incarnating the values which the Humanities Department and the Institute attempt to study and act upon, particularly our concern for citizenship. “On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.”¹

To gear ourselves anew for effective commitment to these ventures, we have worked this year at renewing both the infrastructure of the Institute and our common vision for its future. The steering committee has been enlarged; separate meetings have been held with our community associates and our faculty associates; and, on December 2, a meeting was held with Kathleen Woodward, PhD, Director of the Simpson Centre for the Humanities at the University of Washington in Seattle and former international co-ordinator of the Consortium of Humanities Centres and Institutes (CHCI) as our resource person.

Kathleen's contribution was visionary and catalytic for the 20 of us who spent the day with her. Both from her international experience as well as from her own experience as a centre director she gave us many stretching perspectives. Out of the day have come ideas for new beginnings in the areas of funding, intra-university profile, citizenship concerns, and approaches to community education. We came away from the day with a renewed sense of what our possibilities are as a small, modestly-funded institute with a great track record (it's our 20th anniversary next year) and a future limited only by our imaginations. I record here our warm thanks to Kathleen Woodward for facilitating an occasion of real stimulation and forward thinking.

Are these small efforts worthwhile? I believe they are, and I am trusting that the readership of this *Bulletin* would agree. This being so, we welcome your support in any form it may take: correspondence and conversation, enquiries about our programs, participation in our events and financial support of the Institute itself. In this last regard, we encourage you to contact Gail McKechnie, Director of Advancement Services, Simon Fraser University, at telephone 604-291-5315 or email gail_mckechnie@sfu.ca to signal your support.

Once again I conclude with greetings to the many of you with whom we have worked over this past year and with whom we hope to work again. We welcome as always your sharing in the ongoing offerings of an Institute with a distinguished past and a future, as I said last year, both engaging and engaged.

Donald Grayston, PhD
Director, Institute for the Humanities

¹ Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, IV.iii.222–24