Remarks to ACLS/AAU Humanities Convocation

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Good morning. It’s a pleasure to be with you.

During the last few years, to my surprise, I have been failing upward in government. Having been asked to serve on the NEH’s National Council in 2002, I later briefly directed its Preservation division and now find myself as the Endowment’s Deputy Chairman, living a temporary double life: bureaucrat by day, novelist by night.

This is some overlap. Most of my novels have been historical in nature, arising to one extent or another out of immersion in whichever American newspapers covered the time and place of my subject matter.

It was, as many of you know, the NEH’s United States Newspaper Program that for 25 years funded the microfilming of nearly 70 million pages of American journalism. That program is now reaching a conclusion, but it is finding a natural successor in the Endowment’s National Digital Newspaper Program, an enterprise that promises to be a signature achievement for the NEH during the first portion of the 21st century. In partnership with the Library of Congress, we now have projects in six states that are getting us started on what we expect will be a twenty-year, 30-million-page journey.

The NDNP, as it’s called, will allow social historians—and novelists—without ever traveling from their library carrels and laptops, to track how all manner of events and trends once played out simultaneously in different parts of the country. The same digitized materials available to the professoriate will also be at the fingertips of the ordinarily curious, who will have no need of an ID card providing entrance to the university libraries that are usually the only place the old USNP microfilms—and then only local ones—can be found.

This new digital program will, I hope, help to narrow the gap between the scholar and the citizen. The project’s first quarter of a million pages will be up online this September, joining material produced by similar projects in a growing number of other nations from Finland to Australia. The effect of having all this material available will be to collapse both time and geography, to provide a kind of intellectual transportation that is very much in keeping with the globalized culture that concerns us here this morning.

The NEH is currently considering a whole range of digital initiatives, from interoperable editing projects to the funding of digital humanities centers to support for peer-reviewed online scholarly journals. I will be delighted to play a small part in all these enterprises, even as I sometimes feel a bit like some ancient bellettristic canary being inserted into the gleaming underground mine where all the scanning and electronic ubiquity are made to happen.
I marvel at the possibilities for digitizing classic humanities texts in such a way that students can follow links from every concept and proper name within to a thousand other sites—even as I worry about making a page from Plato look like a Wikipedia entry, bristling with so many digressions that a reader loses the chance to be contemplative.

At last year’s convention of the Association of Research Libraries, I could feel, during some of the presentations, a whiff of cyber apocalypse in the air, as the copyright laws were made to sound like nasty fixed bayonets standing between the reader and a digital utopia. One speaker urged acquisitions librarians to buy not so much as a single trade book that they were not instantly allowed to copy digitally. My daytime existence cheered this idea as a loaves-and-fishes miracle of cultural access; my nighttime novelist self whispered to me a reminder that I am a card-carrying member of the Authors Guild and once wrote a rather Draconian book on plagiarism, in which I had argued—as I still believe—that the protection of intellectual property is a stimulant to creativity and therefore ultimately a public good.

I come to you muddled and conflicted about the various forces that are stimulating the globalization of culture. In fact, I hope that my very miscellaneous remarks this morning will be taken as a brief for ambivalence, for humility and improvisation when it comes to most questions in this realm, and for the practice of what Kwame Anthony Appiah, in a new book, nicely calls fallibilism, “the sense that our knowledge is imperfect and provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence.”

One of the most vexing questions about global culture involves cultural patrimony—who owns or rightfully inherits the artistic labors and products of the past. Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, has been warmly praised in recent months for an agreement his museum was able to reach with the Italian government that will result in the repatriation of twenty-one improperly acquired art objects, most notably the Euphronios krater.

A few weeks ago I was in the audience for a speech by Mr. de Montebello at the National Press Club in Washington. What was most bracing about his presentation was the kind of honest intellectual conflictedness, even agony, that he displayed over the matter. He seemed to spend more time arguing the opposite case or premise than he did the one people assumed underlay his recent, particular decision. “Are the inhabitants of modern states, some less than a hundred years old,” he asked, “the natural and legal heirs of 5,000-year-old cultures whose physical remains are found in and within their borders?” Pointing out art’s perennial promiscuity, the way it has “forever been sought, carried from one place to the other,” he reminded us that “There is no pure culture, which is why so much more can be learned when it is not seen in isolation but in a setting where civilizations can be studied comparatively,” something that is “done optimally and, in a sense, exclusively in art museums.” Or, as Appiah puts in that new book, Cosmopolitanism, “it is the value of cultural property to people and not to peoples that matters. It isn’t peoples who experience and value art; it’s men and women.”

UNESCO’s Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, passed last fall over the vigorous and principled objections of the United States, stands, I believe—and I am speaking for myself here—as a kind of dangerous cultural protectionism, potentially as harmful to the free exchange of ideas as protective tariffs were to
economic prosperity in the early twentieth century. Thirty years ago Daniel Patrick Moynihan argued that the Third World would never feed itself “by suggesting that Americans eat too much.” Today I would join those who recall his words and argue that European and other nations will never feel culturally secure by making it difficult for their citizens to watch Police Academy 5. If, as we have learned on campus, the antidote to hate speech is not speech codes, but more and better and braver speech, then the proper response to unwanted cultural advances is not the UNESCO Convention’s potentially speech-restrictive Article 8, but the freely-willed decision to skip the imported film and go off to write your own poem.

The need for Americans to learn foreign languages—even in an era of increasing dominance by English—remains acute. I believe it’s both inevitable and appropriate that national security considerations are spurring the government toward greater efforts in this area, but I think I’m probably in agreement with President Randel and most of you that this could have a higher priority for all of us in more peaceful times as well.

Language is at the heart of our subject here today. Indeed, the description of the panel that was supplied to me includes this sentence: “The future will require the ability to engage in acts of cultural translation, to engage with languages and cultures of others both in the United States and in the world.” I agree wholeheartedly, and I would also venture to suggest to this distinguished gathering of American humanists that intelligibility begins at home. I departed the life of academic literary criticism in the 1980s partly because I was faced with reading and reviewing books like the one on Joseph Conrad that contained this sentence: “In these instances, a seemingly meaningful logical surface is subverted by the ontic vacancy of raw diversity established through a plurality of multiplicative inverses, to which the idea of orderly and sequential monogenesis is indeed alien.” The heart of my review consisted of eight syllables: “no one should write like this, ever.”

When I see the applications for Research Fellowships that arrive at NEH I am continually impressed by the range and vitality of the American academic. But I confess to you that I am also frequently appalled by the language in which these proposals are made. This complaint is not new, but it is also neither trivial nor Philistine. The risible levels of jargon and obscurity in humanities discourse are evidence that in the sad divorce of the academic world from the rest of it, academe has been to a great extent the responsible party—a sullen spouse that has for so long murmured so incomprehensibly and pompously that its partner and children have fled the room and turned up the TV and stereo. The NEH will continue, proudly, to fund scholarship from all disciplines, specialties and points of view, but the Endowment will not fund intellectual inquiry that makes language its victim instead of its instrument. If the NDNP can narrow the gap between the scholar and the citizen, so can the American university professor.

During the past few years the NEH has received an infusion of nearly forty million dollars in additional funding through the We the People program. This program originated in the immediate post-9/11 environment and was prompted by a concern that Americans, at a dangerous hour in their experience, needed a fuller awareness of their own history, culture and values. More than ninety percent of We the People appropriations go right back into the NEH’s regular grant-making divisions, and while the money is spent on American-themed projects, the net effect of our receiving it has in most years been to allow the Endowment to spend even more
of its regular appropriations than before on projects with international subject matter and focus—whether that be the *Encyclopedia Iranica* at Columbia University; institutes for social-studies teachers on the history and culture of South Africa; the production of original radio programs exploring the musical cultures of the African Diaspora; or, in cooperation with the National Science Foundation, an effort at documenting some of the world’s endangered languages—which is most of them.

Americans should be able to gain imaginative entry into other cultures more easily than almost any other people—if they have an understanding of their own country as being less a matter of geography than a moral and intellectual construct. This I would argue is the true meaning of American exceptionalism—a matter not of any special destiny or exemption but of origin. We are not unique as such a construct, but we may lay claim to a unique degree of success, if we consider such other abstractly-derived nations as, say, tormented Liberia, or the failed and oppressive Soviet Union.

Americans should, I believe, approach the study of other cultures with reasonable humility, but without any apology for a belief in complete freedom of thought and expression as they make the approach. These are, after all, the most basic elements in the construct of ideals from which they themselves hail. On this one point I *would* be an absolutist and not a fallibilist. When I was very young John F. Kennedy said that he would make all his decisions while President “as an American, a Democrat and a free man.” The last of these identities transcended even the proud national one with which he led off his pledge.

In April of last year I traveled to Afghanistan in connection with grants the NEH had made to the National Geographic Society. With our assistance National Geographic had helped to catalogue the treasures of the war-ravaged Kabul Museum and the fabled Bactrian horde—Afghanistan’s ancient gold treasures, which managed to stay hidden from both the Soviets and the Taliban during two decades of war and repression. This particular piece of cultural patrimony will before long tour the world and, it is hoped, raise awareness and funds that will help to rebuild the cultural infrastructure of a brutalized but reawakening country.

It is impossible to overestimate the trauma of anyone involved in Afghanistan’s cultural work during the time of the Taliban. While I was in Kabul, Mr. Abdullah Hakimzada, a conservator at the Kabul Museum, explained to me that he had had to open the cases to many of the sculptures it had once been his business to restore and preserve, so that the Taliban—in his presence—could smash whichever objects depicted human subjects. I could not escape the impression that Mr. Hakimzada, so shy and thoughtful in the face of my questions, seemed dead behind his eyes—as if, and no wonder, his experience was something he would never get over.

But later that week I met Dr. Mohammed Yusef Asefi, a physician and gifted amateur painter who during the years of the Taliban had an office at the National Gallery of Art in Kabul. Expecting that representatives of the regime would soon arrive to vandalize the gallery’s holdings, Dr. Asefi took it upon himself, as surreptitiously as possible, to paint over, with watercolor, the human figures in dozens of oil paintings on the gallery’s walls. He would take the paintings to his office, do his work, and then manage to rehang them. Every time he did this
he risked his life. After the Taliban were routed from Kabul in 2001, the watercolor was washed away and the human figures came out of hiding, back into the eye of a beholder.

When I met Dr. Asefi at a reception at the American Institute of Afghan Studies, the power failed for a few minutes—a common enough occurrence in Kabul. As we stood there in the dark, among a little group of guests waiting for the lights to come back on, I heard him say, with soft merriment and to no one in particular, “I want a kiss.” Romantic and mischievous, this was the voice of human nature, the voice of a man engaged in the pursuit of happiness—a phrase that can spark delight in even the titanically severe V. S. Naipaul, who in an essay called “Our Universal Civilization” describes the pursuit of happiness as “an elastic idea,” one that “fits all men” and contains “the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement.” It is, Naipaul says, “an immense idea” that “cannot generate fanaticism.”

Which makes it an idea that cannot be stilled ordialed back to what revolutionaries like to call Year One. In the cheerful voice of Dr. Asefi it belonged to a man whose bravery had probably derived from the very love of culture that he defended with his life. I keep his picture in my office—to remind me that what I do—what you do—is by its nature universal, and perhaps more important than anything else on earth.

Thank you very much.