

Noël Valis of Yale University was invested as a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2024.

In [this video](#), Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Dr. Valis about how great literature helps us discover our common humanity, the danger of politicizing the study of literature, and the need for the modern university to develop a clear understanding of its mission.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

Hello, this is Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and today I'm interviewing Noël Vallis of Yale University, one of our Academy members. Noël, thank you so much for being with us.

Noël Valis, Yale University

Thank you.

Forster

What are some underappreciated ways in which the work in your field contributes to human understanding and well-being?

Valis

That's one of those large questions, but we only have a limited amount of time. I would point out two things but preface my remarks on what may be underappreciated concerning my field, which is that you really can't talk about the scholarship of my field without talking about the literature and the culture. They're intimately connected. But even more so, it would be difficult to understand what we call "Hispanism" – our fancy term for studying things that have to do with Spain and Latin America and the Caribbean, and sometimes even the literature produced by Hispanics in the United States as well – without going back to how it came about. That means going back to Spain having discovered the New World. I don't want to rehearse the entire history, obviously, but it is an instance of a field, broadly defined Hispanism, that actually comes out of discovery, conquest, encounters, conflicts, but also enrichments with the encounters between different cultures. That's one of the things that the field that I work in can illuminate for other people – understanding other cultures and understanding them as entwined not only with the literature, but with the history.

A second thing, equally important, if not more so, and probably something you could say about other fields, particularly in the humanities, is that the best scholarship will reflect some of the great work in literature and culture, in the arts and music and so on that Latin America and Spain have produced. They illuminate the human predicament. They illuminate humans' desire to transcend themselves. They illuminate human nature. If you think about some of the great writers and figures who have come out of the Spanish language, you would start with Cervantes and Don Quixote. As soon as you say that, you already understand what the field contributes. The best scholarship is going to illuminate these kinds of texts, the kinds of concerns that I just noted and, beyond that, the beauty of these works. Some of this is being lost with some of the various trends in scholarship. It's extraordinarily important not to lose them.

Forster

C. S. Lewis said that one of the great contributions of literature is that it allows us to see the world through other people's eyes. What he primarily had in mind was different historical situations, but across cultures is also a way in which we can see the world through other people's eyes. It strikes me that while he was emphasizing seeing through the eyes of people who see things differently, you're emphasizing we also discover similarities in that way. That puts me in mind of the director Ang Lee, when he adapted *Sense and Sensibility*, he commented that when he read Jane Austen's novel with an eye toward whether he would adapt it to the screen, he said he felt like he was reading Chinese literature.

Valis

That's a very good example. This points to the greatest works having this universality, which means on the one hand, when you read something like a novel by Jane Austen or you read *Don Quixote*, you are entering into a world that is not your own, to connect with Eliot's comments. At the same time, there's a sense of recognition, the things that you see that you have in common with these characters.

Forster

Yes, and having gone through a historical period where we were increasingly aware of difference, I feel like there's now a moment for increasing awareness of commonality as well. Maybe there's a pendulum that swings back and forth.

Valis

You have to keep in mind both, differences, yes, but commonalities, absolutely. That's something we could work more on within the university system.

Forster

We certainly could stand to do more.

That might lead to my next question. What are one or two challenges that you see in your field right now for maintaining high intellectual standards?

Valis

My answer will probably reflect similar concerns in other fields. Some very fine and rigorous scholarship has been produced over the past several decades within Hispanism. My own field is actually more specifically the literature, history and culture of modern Spain. But I've worked in other areas as well.

A couple of trends are concerning because they could endanger the high intellectual standards to which you refer. One is the excessive politicization of research and of teaching. If we're going to talk about research, we need also to talk about teaching. There is more and more a tendency toward politicizing research. This seeps into teaching. There is a tendency as well for some colleagues to elide or confuse scholarship with activism. This can also compromise the quality of research. It puts into question what research is, what scholarship is, why we're doing it. That is a larger question that, obviously, we're not going to be able to address efficiently right now.

Forster

It's not that politics is irrelevant to the stories that define our understanding of who we are. We've been talking about how literature creates communities. But if we don't consciously resist the gravitational pull toward polarized conflict, we'll just inevitably consume everything.

Valis

I completely agree. Politics is obviously a legitimate area of study, and politics and literature, certainly. I have done that myself with my work on the Spanish Civil War. Of course, it's also historical and cultural scholarship. These are legitimate and very important areas of study, and great work has been done in them. But it's that turning everything into an arena where you pit what you think is the only way to see things against the other way that you reject out of hand. This is very reductive. It limits our understanding of how complex these cultures and literatures are. We're missing something in this sense.

Forster

This is an example I like to use. One of the things Shakespeare had in mind when he wrote *Merchant of Venice* was, is it even possible for people of different religions to live together peacefully under a shared civil law? But that's not the only thing he cared about. If that's the only thing *you* care about, you won't really understand that play and the broader human aspects of these questions, if you come to it simply with an agenda you want to promote.

Valis

As if you already have an answer. Literature at its best poses a lot of questions, but not necessarily all the answers.

Forster

That's right. Science always wants to get straight to the answer.

Let me ask you one last question. In what ways do you think the general public has a good understanding of the mission of the university? And in what ways do you think public understanding of the university might fall short?

Valis

A good question and certainly very relevant right now. I would turn it on its head, but I'll return also to your question, which is an important one. The public understands the mission of the university to the degree that universities themselves understand their own mission. Universities seem to be wandering away from what the mission might be.

Let me give you an example of a single sentence that was adopted, broadly speaking, to indicate what the mission is at Yale. It says simply, "the mission of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences is to preserve, advance and transmit knowledge through inspiring research, teaching and art." That seems a nice, precisely worded mission statement. Interestingly enough, the last time I looked, it had disappeared from every website at Yale University, but it had been approved only a few short years ago. So one has to ask, does the university even know what its mission is? By saying that, can you lay out in black and white,

and for all eternity, what the mission of the university is? No, but it should be sufficiently open and open-ended and large.

Does the public know or understand that? I'm not sure. If they don't, it is at least partly our problem that we haven't communicated this sufficiently or clearly. This may also be because the mission of a university, of universities, is apparently not as clear to them in the current day as might be helpful for the public to understand. There was a recent poll in which the public was asked about universities and their relationship to government. One hopeful sign is that the public seems to understand that universities, if they are to exist and function properly, must be independent. That is good. But the public does not have a very good understanding of what we actually do.

Forster

I think that's likely to be true. A deficient public understanding may not be the public's fault. We should look within and see if we have contributed to that. Historian George Marston, who wrote a well-acclaimed history of the university in the United States, emphasizes that there has never been a golden age in the past when the mission of the university was widely agreed upon. There's always been much contestation about what the mission of the university is. Many constituencies want to pull the university in their direction. But in some ways, that's testimony to the importance of what we do.

Valis

We just need to communicate that better. It's not the only thing that we need to do, but it does seem that the public often doesn't understand this. It's because we haven't been able to express it, and also because, as you note, it's contested.

Forster

The contestations outside the university are mirrored inside the university. But I suppose we wouldn't be academics if we all agreed on the significance of what we were doing.

Valis

Now, this may or may not have to do with this question, but I was also thinking, apart from research, of the importance of teaching, and especially teaching undergraduates. Especially if you're teaching literature, as I do, one of the things that is part of university life and the experience that students should have is that literature has to be deeply connected to life. The conversations that you have in the classroom have to bring that out. I mentioned this in relation to your last question because this is one of the things that perhaps we haven't sufficiently underlined for the public, how extraordinarily important it is to understand how literature is connected to our own lives.

Forster

We are never mere technical experts in the classroom. We appear as the people we are, and that's part of what makes the liberal arts exciting and important. They are about what it means to be human.

Valis

Yes, exactly. I learned an awful lot when I actually started teaching outside of my department. There's a certain irony to all of this. I've taught in a program called Directed Studies here, which is Yale's version of the Great Books Program. It's a wonderful program. It's a small program. It's not required, unlike it is at Columbia. Students choose to enroll in the program. It has been an extraordinary experience for me because it really brought home what I always thought is at least part of my role in the classroom: to open these books up for the students to understand themselves better and what the world is like.

Forster

That's what education is ultimately about. Noël, thank you so much for being with us.

Valis

It was a pleasure. Thank you.