THE HUMANITIES AND THE CHALLENGE

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In defining the humanities one needs to avoid the kind of definition which, as Dr Johnson might have said, only shows "the narrowness of the definer"; yet in his own Dictionary he limited himself, under the word humanity, to the meaning "philology; grammatical studies", reminiscent of the Scottish use of the word to mean "the study of the Latin language and literature". Today the meaning of humanities has to be much wider than any narrow definition of literae humaniores or the studia humanitatis, though at their broadest these recall humanitas as used, for example, by Cicero in speaking of being "civilised by studies proper to culture" (politi propriis humanitatis artibus). Because there is an implied exclusiveness about this we might not wish to own, we instead appropriate Terence's words - in the way the Academy's own motto has - to include an interest in everything human, in what it means to be human.

I don't raise the question of definition with the intention, like Shakespeare's Puck, of putting "a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes". Rather I raise it to guard against too narrow an interpretation of the humanities. The world of the humanities is remarkable for the richness of the things which make it up - human history, human thought, human experience, human creativity; the kind of richness that makes humane studies so fascinating and remarkably open-ended, so intractable to any set formula. This is not only an important part of the challenge of the humanities but one reason why those who pursue other studies are sometimes in danger of misunderstanding their relevance, or even the very means by which one reaches an understanding of them.

Such philistinism, often outwardly educated but usually aggressive, presents its own challenge to the process of understanding and evaluation. It becomes, in fact, especially disabling when, through so-called official circles, it affects the kind of funding which, in the community's interest, the humanities should attract. Because humane studies seem on the surface more accessible than some other studies, they are sometimes regarded as less rigorous or lacking in depth. And one of the most pernicious of the official attitudes that prevail is the notion that their study is not a matter of research but just a matter of scholarship.

That such a notion should permeate official circles is bad enough, but there are signs that even in academic circles it is beginning to harden into dogma. Even when things have not gone so far, there is still a danger that the difference between humane studies and other sorts of studies may be formulated in such a way as to imply that the former are somehow lacking in the depth or rigour or innovative dimension one normally associates with research. Last year Professor Frank Westheimer, Emeritus Professor of Chemistry at Harvard University and the recipient of the Priestley Medal, said in his acceptance speech at the 3rd Chemical Congress of North America that "learning in science is vertical" whereas "the horizontal nature of knowledge in the humanities" means that "there is a lesser problem in extending knowledge in a field of the humanities".2
I wonder whether my learned colleagues would agree, those who, for the last twenty years, have been elected to the Academy of the Humanities for their distinguished contributions to research. Their research adds up to many volumes, and the onus should be on those who wish to argue that such volumes do not constitute research. Leaving, however, such volumes aside, I remember hearing at an international conference a paper by one of the Academy's Fellows on "Hume's Argument about the Unobserved" – a paper that seemed to me to constitute a distinguished piece of research because of the rigour or quality of the thinking it contained. It was certainly not an example of unscholarly thinking, but my point is that its originality should not be masked by having it called "scholarship" and denied the title of research.

Let me say at once that I agree with much of Professor Westheimer's argument as it relates to education in science; in his own words, he was "proselytizing for more science for nonscientists", and in this respect I am one of the "nonscientific friends" to whom he refers. The case for science and technology is today indisputable, even though an insistence on high-tech should not mislead us into banking Australia's future on it, especially now that the high-tech hype of a few years ago is coming to be called the "high-tech hoax". One may, anyway, wonder how Australia will be situated in a world that in the future moves increasingly towards trading blocs. In the context of the subject of this lecture, let me say merely this: when the claims for relevance or utility reflect unfairly on more humane studies, one needs to enter a caveat; the call for "much more science", for example, must not be allowed to erode the opportunity for studying the humanities where, according to Westheimer, knowledge should be "primarily extensive rather than intensive". There is on the face of it a curious inconsistency in the learned chemist's argument, for less humanities is supposed to cover what is by definition more "extensive"; but the point he is concerned to argue is that "underpinnings", "platforms for understanding", are vital in science but not in humane studies, so that it is better to pay the price, and it is, says Westheimer, "a real price", of "knowing less Shakespeare at graduation".

What Westheimer implies is that knowing Shakespeare depends on how much one reads rather than on how one reads. To be fair, this is not explicitly his assumption, but the way he thinks about literary studies or "the horizontal nature of education in the humanities" does nothing to dispel the impression that for him nothing rigorous is involved in approaching Shakespeare with proper critical attention. His is reminiscent of the pervasive stance of officialdom that seeks to distinguish research from scholarship; presumably a critical re-appraisal of one of Shakespeare's plays would not in some quarters count as research. I should like, however, to invoke the etymology of "research" and argue the opposite. The Oxford English Dictionary reminds us that the prefix re-, of Latin origin, has the general sense of "back" or "again", and occurs in a large number of words directly or indirectly adopted from Latin, or of later Romantic origin. It has, moreover, an intensive force – to search or study closely or carefully. Etymology will not, I suspect, prevail against those disinclined to fund another close look at one of Shakespeare's plays – say, for example, Macbeth – despite the fact that future generations will read this play
at school or university, and that people will go on teaching it with more or less critical insight; a play, moreover, that reveals something tantalising and even frightening about human nature, which may be pursued not just in the name of understanding (surely a worthwhile goal in itself), but also by those who need to fathom how people sometimes behave.

I choose *Macbeth* because it has proved such a problem for commentators that more research (in the sense I am suggesting) seems called for. The hero of the play commits or engineers such terrible crimes — the murders of Duncan and Banquo and the slaughter of Macduff's family — that many critics have seemingly encountered a difficulty in approaching the play and its hero because, I suspect, of their preconceived ideas of Shakespearian tragedy and what they take to be its perceived moral order. The play has been variously given a Romantic, a Christian, a Nietzschean, a Machiavellian interpretation, as well as certain variations of these, as critics from A. C. Bradley onwards have adopted different critical approaches in interpreting and (I would argue) in sometimes sentimentalising and denaturing it. One American critic has tried to avoid these contortions by postulating a different kind of tragic hero. He has suggested that Macbeth is "a contracting character", and that we need as audience to do "considerable scrambling" in sharing "the point of view" of the play's hero precisely because this commits us "to experience the deliberate choice of evil".

But how "deliberate" is Macbeth's "choice of evil"? This is arguably an important question the play raises. Its suggestiveness derives not so much from what has been called "the undertow of the essentially guilty mind" as from something almost more incalculable and uncertain. The hero's "Vaulting Ambition, which o'erleaps itself" (I. vii. 27) has a wayward and unstoppable movement of its own; and not just the Witches' prophecies but the goading on of his wife push Macbeth in the same fateful direction. Shakespeare's presentation of how the hero *yields* to the "suggestion" or "thought" of "murder" (I. iii. 139) involves us in the whole problematic issue of choice and the part this plays in human action. It is not that the hero does not have, in some theoretical sense, freedom of action: even as we are invited to witness the pressures that act upon him, we are also invited to glimpse the ways in which a different course of action is resisted, the readiness with which Macbeth adjures the eye to wink at the hand, or his almost wilful impenetrability to the claims of pity and justice — to the "tears" that, in his own vivid words, "shall drown the wind" (I. vii. 25). Yet we also become aware that his consciousness has become so engrossed by a potential course of action that he seems unable to act otherwise. Is the hero's consciousness — or anyone's consciousness — committed to a certain momentous decision even as it seeks to rationalise or otherwise deliberate upon it? Has the die already been cast with Macbeth's "thought" of "murder" so that any further thought can really lead only in one direction? Has the "thought" of "murder" effectively and inevitably led to the murder of any further thought?

This problematic nexus in human experience gives dramatic impetus to the first part of *Macbeth*, where the hero is described as "rapt" (I. iii. 56, 143). In his first lengthy aside he graphically describes the dislocation he experiences:
he seems no longer in possession of his own volition or any clear sense of his own identity. In a later soliloquy he appears as though split between two conflicting roles, almost between two identities (I. vii. 12-16). In fact, he sees himself at times as a virtual spectator or onlooker, seeking to invest agency in things he fancies outside himself – some impersonal act or other like "th' assassination" (I. vii. 2), or the famous air-drawn dagger (II. i.), or "the bell" which "invites" him to Duncan's murder, at the same time as he expresses an almost Freudian wish that the bell should not be heard (II. i. 65-7).

In the second part of the play, what has been set on foot leads to the hero's tortured ravening of himself. Because of the other prophecies, he invokes "Fate" and dares it "to th' utterance" – a l' outrance (III. i. 72-3). He becomes committed to immediate desperate action – action that is terrible in its wilful blindness. Led on to increasingly more barbarous acts in fighting the unfightable, he loses control not only over the future but over himself. He becomes himself victim in a particularly acute sense. The imagery of his wading "in blood" (III. iv. 137-8) suggests how appallingly immersed he is; and here there is the most terrible irony of all. Macbeth will not only mercilessly ravage his country like a bloody plague from the Apocalypse but call down a terrible judgment upon himself. The suggestiveness of this goes beyond the mere idea of his accepting his own damnation for he becomes the very instrument of his own punishment.

As the false confidence engendered by the Witches is gradually stripped from him, even Macbeth's kind of "destruction" begins to "sicken" (IV. i. 59). He becomes "tied . . . To a stake", "bear-like" and at bay, not only in being dogged and ravened by his own actions but in being forced vainly to "fight the course" (V. vii. 1-2) against overwhelming odds. Two things especially, in these later scenes, shape our tragic response: first, Macbeth's own realisation of how terrible it must be to live under the kind of tyrant he has become – the "mouth-honour, breath/ Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not" (V. iii. 27-8); second, the very human defiance by which he refuses to "yield" (V. vii. 57) even when death finally stare him in the face. If, as many critics of the play have seemed to imply, we were to make a simplistic identification with the hero, we would not be able to experience his tragedy to the full. Our summation of life's significance is not confined to what his becomcs; our perspective is informed by what he has done and suffered, including his moving awareness of what he has reduced life to, and reduced himself to. Yet we cannot, even so, adopt any complacency towards Macbeth as hero. The almost unfathomable way in which his thoughts become actions, or the way in which this seems to abort the very process of thought, precludes any smugness on our part in claiming for ourselves a different order of being. We cannot have the eye wink at what the hero does, or dissociate ourselves from this by any easy sleight of hand. The dramatic action turns on a problematic nexus in human experience, and it is this which contributes to the play's power and provides in large measure the challenge of its continuing suggestiveness.

I have pursued this example at some length not only to indicate the kind of research or thinking about texts that in the humanities must accompany teaching (whatever splits between research and teaching governments here or
elsewhere – in Australia or Britain – might in their unwisdom propose), but also to illustrate what the humanities' concern with works of the creative imagination can offer. It is not enough to say that "when viewed historically texts are most fully humanized, and the strangenesses in them become accessible in new ways", because such a statement, made collectively by those deans and directors who in America have been defending the present state of the humanities, leads them to note that Macbeth was "written by Shakespeare when his company was under the protection of King James I, formerly King James VI of Scotland, a king who had written extensively about both tyranny and witchcraft". What seems far more pertinent is the acknowledgement by the same group of scholars that what has been imagined in the past should "be made a living force within the present". Mankind's curiosity about itself is fed and extended by great imaginative literature, and we may remember Allan Bloom's words about his own more recent students: "The loss of the books has made them narrower and flatter... They are both more contented with what is and despairing of ever escaping from it." While we do not read great literature in the name of utility, one could nevertheless suggest to, let us say, a marriage-guidance counsellor that the usually stereotyped Jane Austen has more than a little to offer our understanding of human relationships in the importance she attaches to mutual self-respect, to intimacy as a shared privacy, and to honesty and responsiveness as a basis for what catches and tends to hold between two people. Of course, any reference to the classical dulce et utile needs to be developed carefully, and with respect to Jane Austen I once tried to do this in the following terms:

Jane Austen was firmly in possession of the truth about human existence which Nicolas Berdyaev has reminded us of, namely, that "love and friendship are man's only hope of triumphing over solitude". Moreover, she turns this perception to her own advantage in that there exists a connection (not always easy to elaborate or explain) between the heroine's being thrown on her own resources and the kind or quality of character that this experience refines or reveals. Whatever the means employed, what remains distinctive about her heroines is their active involvement in the situations in which they find themselves. Though they may be isolated, they are never static or inert, for all are engaged in a continuous, ongoing activity of thinking and responding.

There is of course a challenge in trying to articulate such things. In a paper given at an Oxford colloquium on "The Future of the Humanities", Sir Keith Thomas said:

The real case for studying the humanities... must surely rest upon the intrinsic value of the subject matter involved and the light it throws on human beings, human society and the human imagination... A knowledge of literature and history
can help people to lead fuller, richer lives. . . . They enlarge our experience, enhance our self-consciousness, widen our sense of what is humanly possible and, most important of all, enable us to step outside the assumptions of our own day and to escape the tyranny of present-mindedness, so that we can view our own times with some sense of detachment.14

Responding to the humanities involves, like living, a continuous, ongoing activity, and their relevance consists in the experience and examples they offer. They not only awaken our intellectual and very human curiosity and, in the process, contribute to our ability to be properly critical or reflective; they also become part of our own experience, of our own involvement in the process of living, a process fraught with responsibility yet intractable to any neat formula, and requiring all the wisdom we can bring to it — a process various and unpredictable, tentative, difficult, joyous, intense. Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican's Stanza della Segnatura, about which Sir Ernst Gombrich has written so revealingly, constitute their own kind of touchstone, and inform our sense of energy in equipoise, of a dynamism as well as artistic completeness that allows no room for the fragmentation of experience. Or we might confront another paradigm through Shakespeare's King Lear, a play that denies all comfort to the audience — in a way so unlike the later mature comedies — by not giving its characters a second chance:

CORDELIA Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?

LEAR No, no, no, no. Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.

In this play hopes and expectations are constantly defeated, closed off, so that, as a work of art, King Lear tends to collapse its very frame, to remove, as it were, the boundaries within which art can be confined and contained. The play carries us almost beyond the bounds of endurance, to the very edge of the stark and searing, in showing how painful and how unaccommodating human life can be.

If the humanities have the intrinsic value that has been suggested, the value of reminding us of our humanity, of our flexibility, of our potential, of our ability to respond to and beyond the present, they present us with the challenge of having them reach the widest possible audience. Over the years the Academy has tried to widen the audience of its Symposia, a move to be applauded. Whereas academies and academic institutions have tended to be exclusive, they ought not to be inward-looking, and we should recall the example of Socrates who conducted the "dialectic of conversation" with the people he met in the street.15 Today, however, while we need to stress the importance of continuing or adult education as well as the need to provide for the community's interest in humane studies, we may seem to some not at leisure to pursue a "liberal" education. Yet we can rightly argue the importance
of reading, thinking, writing, speaking — of the modern equivalents of liberal arts — and we should, perhaps, like the Americans, take a leaf out of nineteenth-century Oxford and recognise the "vocational potential of a 'liberal' education", even in today's world of business and technology. Perhaps we should say especially in the world of today's business and technology. In *The Closing of the American Mind* Allan Bloom contrasts the "narrow education" of the "highly trained computer specialist", together with "the prejudices and the pride accompanying it, and its literature which comes to be and passes away in a day and uncritically accepts the premises of current wisdom" — Bloom contrasts this with the "serious writings" that, informed by "experience" and "passion", put people in touch with "a great and ennobling past".

But what, for us as Australians, could be classed as "vocational" about the kind of "experience" to which Bloom refers? Here, I think, we must be concerned not to sell ourselves short, or allow ourselves to be sold short by official policy-makers; yet it would seem the very process of having them think in a way that is supportive of the humanities represents a challenge which we should neither underestimate nor yet fail to take up. The more we know about our own culture, the better off we shall be; nor should we have our voices lost in some kind of acculturial void. At the "Threshold Issues for Asia" conference held in December 1988, more than one overseas speaker expressed the view that before economic, geopolitical or even environmental issues can be discussed in the countries of the Pacific Rim we need to be able, above all, to understand one another. As well as the imaginative insight and creative thinking, analytical skills, powers of self-expression and insistence on values which the humanities have traditionally inculcated, we also need to know our own culture, to know who we are, whence we have come, what we stand for. Successful business, for example, often involves communication at an interpersonal level that is also intercultural. Nor is this just a matter of language learning, for it embraces also a sense of civilization. It involves cross-cultural studies, including questions of identity, at a much deeper level than just language learning, for what must occur is the kind of acculturation that recognises and reaches to underlying philosophies and values. Australia at the threshold of the twenty-first century must arguably be a player in its own region or become a pauper in its own region, and what should, I think, be recognised is that this country is uniquely placed to contribute to the ongoing process of defining its own region — which is not simply a matter of substituting "Asian Studies" for "European Studies". I do not, however, underestimate the enormous challenge involved in helping to define our evolving region, but it is a challenge which can only be appropriately undertaken if the humanities accept and play their part in it. Perhaps the Academy should consider taking up the challenge, at least to the extent of framing some such topic for a future symposium.

Let me speak, too, of another kind of challenge, of the need for low fences not so much between academic institutions and their communities as between the various parts of the same institution. There is often a misapprehension that the etymology of words like "college" and "university" imply some universality of learning, or some community of scholars drawn from an
array of different disciplines. From their very different origins this is, of course, how these words have developed, and for very good reason. The really educated person was once considered to be something of a polymath; and even though knowledge has become more specialised, especially with advances in science and technology, there is still an attempt within the modern university to cover a very wide range of disciplines. There is, however, a concomitant danger that is not just a matter of "culture" (as in C. P. Snow's phrase "the two cultures") but also a matter of structure, and academic institutions need to be aware of this. The putting of knowledge into compartments, or the exclusiveness of a particular methodology, can be delimiting, whereas thinking outside certain parameters can enable us to see things in a different (and more revealing) light. Multidisciplinary studies, including a more vital contact between faculties or schools, should enable us not just to make links between different areas of study but to glean new perspectives and ideas in the process. And rapid advances in science and technology have also their relevance for the humanities in the range of choices they make necessary at a faster rate and over a broader spectrum. Choices involve values, and the kind of training or acculturation the humanities can provide is often critical in enabling us to confront the new options provided by today's world. Moreover, given the sometimes simplistic tendency to equate a science focus with "a secure future", we should remember the words of the American Commission on the Humanities, which in its 1980 "Report" stated the following:

The humanities have no rigid institutional or intellectual boundaries. They occupy a central place in our national culture, they help shape the meaning of individuality and citizenship, and they pose fundamental questions about the human purposes of science and technology.\(^{18}\)

When at the end of Milton's "Il Penseroso" the poem's speaker imagines the benefits old age might bring, these are cast in terms of:

The hairy gown and mossy cell,
Where I may sit and rightly spell
Of every star that heaven doth shew,
And every herb that sips the dew,
Till old experience do attain
To something like prophetic strain.

What is interesting here is the sweep from "every star" to "every herb" through the gamut of the universe of knowledge, as though universal knowledge is what should be aimed at to produce the desired end. Such a view would have been anathema to the Waste Watch Committee of a few years ago, but it was not necessarily the enlightened view. Nor was it necessarily more worldly-wise or better versed in matters of state than John Milton! The idea that human curiosity can be dammed up in a particular direction is, I suggest, a dangerous one, and may lead to a deplorable loss of disinterestedness, the quality that is

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so vitally important to proper academic inquiry. It may also lead to the instrumental or narrowly regulated or, in less enlightened times, to the totalitarian. What should, rather, be stressed is the positive aspect of wide-ranging curiosity and the intellectual commitment this argues, the positive aspect of multidisciplinary study, whether this produces a new synthesis, or something more limited though perhaps no less important. Dr Johnson was not, I believe, a noted synthesizer (indeed, rather the reverse), yet the summary Boswell gives of his intellectual capacity is relevant here. Boswell notes that Johnson "was general and unconfined in his studies" and "had accumulated a vast and various collection of learning and knowledge". "His superiority", according to Boswell,

over other learned men consisted chiefly in what may be called the art of thinking, the art of using his mind; a certain continual power of seizing the useful substance of all that he knew, and exhibiting it in a clear and forcible manner; so that knowledge, which we often see to be no better than lumber in men of dull understanding, was, in him, true, evident, and actual wisdom. 19

Many would agree that the greatest challenge the humanities offer is displayed in their attitude of constantly asking questions and, in the process, of questioning former assumptions with the kind of "intellectual ferment" that has been seen to produce "such fundamental reconsiderations of aesthetic, moral, and intellectual traditions". 20 As I said at the beginning of this lecture, humane studies are remarkably open-ended and intractable to any set formula. And it is on this point I should like to end. What we must beware of is accepting too easily a formula, whether of a Waste Watch Committee, or government, or anyone else, because it is the formula – the inflexible formula – that in a changing, flexible, human world may become ultimately disabling. It may become, if you like, the banana skin (Henri Bergson's banana skin) that brings us painfully and comically undone. Professor Westheimer had his own kind of formula, and he was open about proselytizing it. Yet we may also ask whether those who profess the humanities have proselytized enough? If not, is the reason for this a matter of temperament, a congenital shyness inherited by a race of scholars? Or is it the result of a complex of things enjoined on us by our disciplines – a scholarly modesty or humility, a habit of irony, an appropriate tentativeness, an analytic ability to see through formulas of all kinds. In order to stress the relevance and importance of the humanities in today's world, we may well be forced to be less tentative about our disciplines than we have often been in the past. We may well need to proclaim and demonstrate their relevance not just to the interested community (which universities in the past have arguably not made enough effort to involve), but also to politicians and senior policy-makers whose support, as things stand, is necessary to us. It is no good verbally lambasting these people and yet remaining ourselves defensive or self-absorbed, as we as academics are, perhaps, sometimes too prone to be. Indeed, for us to be less retiring or self-absorbed,
and a little more positive about what we profess, may well constitute the greatest challenge which the humanities hold out to us.

NOTES

1. *De Re Publica*, I. xvii. 28.

16. These words are used by L. O. Frappell in "The Rise of the Professor; the Victorian University in Transition", *ibid.*, p. 94.


18. *The Humanities in American Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980, pp. 8-9. The connection between "an appropriate education in science" and "a secure future for all Australians" can be inferred from the issues paper *Science for Everybody* which, with a covering letter from the Minister, was last year distributed to many thousands of individuals and organisations. Presumably the Academy would welcome, and be prepared to advise on, a similar effort by the Curriculum Development Centre on behalf of the humanities.
