

THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT AND OUR TASK IN THE HUMANITIES

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Petrarch, as you remember, limited the notion of Humanities to language and literature, excluding philosophy and anything we would call «scientific». I think he was seriously mistaken and I myself follow Cicero, who included all matters of concern to the human predicament. For practical purposes most of us cannot accommodate within our physical boundaries researches which require laboratories.

I suggest we affirm that the humanities are concerned with *meanings and values*, and therefore with *interpretation and understanding*. We can then embrace most disciplines within our view, and underline the importance of *context and complexity*, and thus of inter-disciplinary enquiry.

It is truly inspiring to us in the West that you have kept the Humanities alive during all the bad times, and are proclaiming the highest standards of scholarship and enquiry. My remarks are offered therefore with due respect to what you have already achieved. But I want to alert you to mistakes *we* have made, and which I hope you will avoid and not repeat.

The quality of work in the West in many domains, is demonstrably of a higher standard than 30 years ago: in many areas of history, the range of evidence unearthed, the detail of investigation undertaken, the contextual links established — all are of higher standards. In the performing arts, the standards achieved exceed those of earlier generations and match those you maintained through the dark days. By contrast, the quality of work in literature departments of Universities throughout the Western world is quite dismal; and the research reports issued by numerous departments within the general field of the social sciences alarmingly narcissistic and detached. The reason is often the same: a strident proclamation since the 1960s in favour of «theory», at the expense of empirical study. «Theory» means «ideology» and usually of an originally Marxist form, although frequently supplemented with post-Freudian ideas and certain dogmas about language: attitude and research in all these areas has been overtly «politicised». In American universities it is deemed politically necessary to assign resources to what I call «interest» group courses — there are numerous special courses for women, blacks, Hispanics, and so on — but the intellectual content and demands of such courses are often non-existent. There is real censorship of language and enquiry, and many kinds of question are ruled out as «politically incorrect». You witnessed more tragic parallels in earlier times, and you may well wonder why the West adopts practices, which in your own history had so many parallels. One major reason is the total detachment by most academics in the Humanities, over the last 50 years, from anything resembling real problems in the world. It is trite, of course, that such complaints have occurred throughout history — you find them in Montaigne and in Dr Johnson. So what do I recommend, and how does it link with our heroes in 18th century Scotland?

Scholarship and enquiry within the very broad domain of the humanities can remain alive and fruitful only when boundaries are challenged, the perspectives of different disciplines are considered, and inter-disciplinary endeavour is promoted. The practical difficulty is that institutional structures typically inhibit these goals, encouraging essentially parochial, short-term achievements. I must state that: *worthless trivia dominate the pages and screens of academic journals*. The writers address only other publications of equal triviality, thus encouraging the ever-inward gaze of self-absorbed academics; and they can often only consider the evidence that happens to lie to hand in the deprived libraries of their neighbourhood.

The next question, which I am sure you have already encountered, and which will take me straight to my Scottish heroes in a moment, concerns *utility*. From Cicero onwards, and probably before, the *utility* of what citizens do has been taken as a central value: but two explicit qualifications were acknowledged. First, although almost everyone **hopes** for benefits from their enquiries, these are often unjustified hopes: that is why some people turned to the suicidal claim of «research for

its own sake» — which invariably means «for *my* sake». In older days, an enquiry about utility was one about worth. The second Ciceronian warning is more important: «utility» should be understood very broadly and from different perspectives — it can refer to the benefits derived from the method of enquiry, from the employment of certain resources, from the educational inspiration it sets — quite apart from any other precise consequences. The range of benefits should not be derided as mere «spin-offs», not should a single model be applied in all areas: no doubt *cures* for cancers are the goal of cancer research generally, but even «cures» are nowadays not regarded as closing a chapter of enquiry or research. Genes mutate, contexts change, problems evolve. Enquiry and research are to do with «opening» not «closing». And yet, I repeat: much research is ill-thought out or even pointless, and here is the challenge. The duties of monitoring standards raise sensitive moral and political questions about people and society. Not everyone is competent or qualified to play for their national tiddly-winks team, or perform on the comb and braces in National day concerts: neither are many so-called scholars remotely qualified or competent to spend your money, or their time, on what they claim to do. Civil society rests on the encouragement of new enquiries, the removal of obsolete practices and the upholding of standards. Our 18th century Scottish ancestors succeeded in these things, and so will you. So what can we learn from them?

The elements of the Scottish Enlightenment I want to draw your attention are these — and I use their own terminology: «improvement», «communication», «civil society». You will recall that their aim was to undertake «improvements» to enhance the wealth and health of all, in order to secure the foundations of civil society. This required self-conscious efforts to promote certain enquiries, diminish certain practices, and avoid guaranteed misunderstandings. All of this called for effective communication by, between and to the appropriate people, and in appropriate ways. Such similarities between their contexts and ours can teach us something.

The union of Scottish and English parliaments in 1707 promoted many changes that were already under way throughout much of Scotland. But the economic base of Scotland was poor, and the clamour for improvement emphasised the need to identify the causes and effects of change in different domains and, if possible, to analyse the nature of change itself. Lawyers, grounded in the Roman-Dutch system, were already speculating on the forces and mechanisms that shaped society, thereby laying the foundations of the so-called «moral sciences». Several notable Church leaders, particularly in Edinburgh, promoted a general attitude of moderation, in order to diminish friction, and enlist co-operation. Scottish philosophers began to argue along continental lines that man was governed more by passion than reason, even though understanding, of course, was an intellectual task. One of flume's most challenging claims was that abstract scientific or religious views neither did, nor

could, motivate and thereby influence lives. Other explanations were needed of human practices and institutions. The point of trying to understand the nature of man was to ensure that whatever might be planned for societies of men took note of man's capacities and limitations. Thus, in economics, theories were based on such social facts as self-interest and sympathy, which motivate individuals and groups.

The context for co-operative thought and work remained fragile even after the 1750s, and special efforts were needed to secure sympathetic breadth of interest among citizens. Small clubs and societies met in taverns throughout the land to discuss, in a convivial atmosphere, both practical issues, as well as the speculative ideas that might underlie them. Discussion of politics and religion was frequently forbidden in the societies in order to avoid disruptive differences in dogmas between members. This embargo, enforced by strict fines, was effective. But the vitality of the groups depended on the vitality of its members, and many were short lived, although a few societies evolved over generations — resulting in one case, after a gestation of almost 50 years, in the foundation of *The Royal Society of Edinburgh* in 1783. The three central topics in Edinburgh societies around the 1750s, were agriculture, mining and banking. No message can be conveyed effectively if you ignore the context, and effective communication is a necessary condition of effective action: therefore, the arts of «rhetoric», in Cicero's rich sense, were a cornerstone of education, and became so for a limited period in Scotland too.

It is from such contexts, I suggest, that we can derive some lessons for ourselves. The conditions for effective co-operative enquiry, involving experts from several disciplines, sharing and contrasting perspectives and frameworks — the conditions are always fragile, and must be carefully nurtured. The vitality, and ultimately the existence, of small teams depends on its members: institutions can ensure continuity and growth, but they bring opposite dangers — paralysis, resistance to change, and complacency. The arts of conversation, on which deep and innovative thought depend, have to be taught and learned, practised and defended: they are threatened in Western society by adversarial politics, by confrontational interviews and mindless chatter on radio and TV. Conversation is an improvisatory skill of the greatest significance for civil society, calling for effective communication, social courtesies, intellectual respect, moderated passions, and remorseless self-criticism. What inspires us in the West is that so many of you have understood all this and are striving to achieve these goals.