The Sacred and the Political; Sense and Nonsense: Thoughts on the Curriculum Now.

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Teachers of the humanities today find themselves in a singular quandary. They have memories and gut feelings about the books, ideas and works of art that matter to them. They would dearly like to teach these things to their students and to open young minds to their meaning. But they are besieged on all sides by experts who speak with other voices – the voices of science, of politics, of ‘theory’. And if they listen to these voices, it begins to seem as though their preferred curriculum has no clear explanation. The curriculum in the humanities begins to look like a random set of objects collected by a dead eccentric for some private museum. It is a curriculum without method, which stems from no definable store of useful knowledge. We can pore over it, subjecting each item to curious examination using tools from psychology, neuroscience, politics or anthropology. But just how they came to be assembled, how they came to sit side by side in the glass case of preserved exhibits, remains a mystery.

During the course of the 19th century, when philology began to give way to the study of literature, art and music as subjects in their own right, an effort was made to provide principles of selection, which would determine which authors, composers and artists would be worthy of study, and what method should be used to explore them. But the result was sparse, impoverished, and seemed to presuppose the very certainties that it was designed to establish. When Matthew Arnold suggested that we should teach, as our cultural inheritance, ‘the best which has been thought and said’, in order to promote human ‘perfection’, it is surely hard to disagree with him. But that is because he has said nothing. He has given us no standard for distinguishing the best from the second best, and no account of what our perfection actually consists in. His is a paradigm case of a circular definition. And it is surely not a great improvement when T.S. Eliot tells us that we should be engaged in the ‘common pursuit of true judgment’, while failing to tell us how we distinguish the true from the false among our many conflicting opinions.

For a long time following the Second World War, during the years when I was falling in love with art, music and literature, the question of the curriculum was held in abeyance. It did not seem to matter that nobody could quite explain why Shakespeare and Beethoven were on it, and Enid Blyton and Chuck Berry were not. There was so much to read, to know, to enjoy and to boast about. But then, all of a sudden the bubble burst. We, the baby boomers, came into our own: we were next in line for those university lectureships. We were deep into fields of scholarship and research that we would be called upon to justify for the sake of our individual ambitions. It was no longer possible just to inherit the curriculum; indeed, it was no longer possible just to inherit anything. Everything had to be ‘put in question’, and the prizes were already going to those who questioned the most. An enormous vacuum opened up in the heart of the world of scholarship, and all the debris of the old curriculum was suddenly sucked away, disappearing into the void. In place of it came nonsense – not traditional nonsense of the kind we associate with Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear, but fierce, belligerent nonsense that seemed determined to hunt out meaning and to wipe it away.

Many people, looking at the universities from a point of view outside them, will I think be taken aback by the extent to which subjects that now pass for humanities in our universities are devoted to the propagation of nonsense of this kind. Consider this (part of a sentence from Jacques Lacan): ‘it is the connection between signifier and signifier that permits the elision in which the signifier installs the lack-of-being in the object relation using the value of ‘reference back’ possessed by signification in order to invest it with the desire aimed at the very lack it supports…’. Or this from Louis Althusser: ‘This is not just its situation in principle (the one it occupies in the hierarchy of instances in relation to the determinant instance: in society, the economy) nor just its situation in fact (whether, in the phase under consideration, it is dominant or subordinate) but the relation of this situation in fact to this situation in principle, that is, the very relation which makes of this situation in fact a variation of the – ‘invariant’ – structure, in dominance, of the totality.’ Reading those sentences you might at first to be astonished to discover that Lacan and Althusser, who came to prominence in the events of May 1968 in Paris, are now established authorities, required reading on the new curriculum in a great many American universities.

Their snippets of theory show the influence of ideas that were in the air in those revolutionary days: Saussurean linguistics as well as Marx and Freud. But the theories and technicalities are neither questioned nor truly examined, but stirred together in the great cauldron that sat in the revolutionary fire. Exciting results often follow, such as Lacan’s proof that ‘schizophrenia’, and I quote from one of his disciples, ‘designates a purely metonymic form of desire untrammelled by the metaphoric associations of equivalence and meaning imposed on desire by social and/or linguistic codes operating in the name of the father’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Or Guattari’s proof that, by getting beyond the signifying semiologies in which we have hitherto been bound to become ‘a-signifying semiotic machines’ we will ‘free desire-production, the singularities of desire, from the signifiers of national, familial, personal, racial, humanist, and transcendent values (including the semiotic myth of a return to nature), to the pre-signifying world of a-semiotic encodings’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The monsters of unmeaning that loom in this prose attract our attention because they are clothed in the fragments of theories, picked up from the aftermath of forgotten battles – the Marxist theory of production, the Saussurean theory of the signifier, the Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex, all I should say, thoroughly refuted by subsequent science, but all somehow retrieved by the Parisian scavengers, and given a ghoulish after-life in the steam above the cauldron.

I don’t need to dwell on the aspect of fraudulence in this literature. Surely nobody with a respect for intellectual honesty could doubt the verdict of Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, in their now famous book *Intellectual Impostures*, which entirely demolishes the phony expertise of Deleuze, Guattari, Baudrillard, Lacan and many more.[[3]](#footnote-3) If you are not persuaded by Sokal and Bricmont, or by Malcolm Bradbury’s brilliant satire *Mensonge*,[[4]](#footnote-4) then there is nothing that I can say that is going to persuade you. And if you still feel that the matter is not closed, and haven’t visited Andrew Bulhak’s Postmodern Generator, on the web, and had the joy of generating your own contribution to this pile of bullshit, then that is certainly what you should do. What Sokal and Bricmont overlook, however, is the political significance of the postmodern metaliterature. They identify themselves as men of the left, which is of course necessary if they are to have the remotest chance of influencing those who are tempted to join the stampede towards postmodern meaninglessness. But they fail to point out, and perhaps fail even to see, that being on the left is what it is all about. The boiling tide of nonsense flows between secure walls on which indelible messages have been chiselled. These tell us that the world is in the hands of the Other; that the other is capitalism, bourgeois society, patriarchy, the family, in other words, the array of traditional power-structures from which we must be liberated.

There is no mystery in the fact that nonsense, once introduced, has a natural capacity to reproduce itself. For, in the right circumstances, nonsense is power. Works like *l’Anti-Oedipe* and Derrida’s *Dissemination* assumed the place that books of spells acquired in alchemy. In the hands of a new academic establishment, which has no confidence that there could be any ground for academic studies in the humanities other than that provided by a political agenda, these works have been the instruments of a Faustian pact. By means of the holy books the teacher of the humanities can acquire power over the Other, and possession of the academic citadel from which the Other is being forced to flee. In the creation and enforcement of orthodoxies nonsense is much to be preferred to rational argument, since it leaves no opening to opposition, no place where the Other can creep back and sow dissent. Perhaps this is one reason for the enormous gratitude with which the generation of 68 was received in humanities departments in Britain and America. Derrida, Cixous, Kristeva and others accumulated honorary degrees all across the Anglophone world, and Deleuze was apparently, in 2007, quoted more often than Kant in academic writing in English.

So what is it that the humanities, as they used to be taught, lacked, that they should have been so easily and rapidly replaced by nonsense?

The answer, I believe, is this. There are broadly two motives for embracing an intellectual movement: one is the love of truth, the other the need for membership. Religions pretend to address the first of those motives, while in fact recruiting the second. Science ignores the second and promotes the first. But the humanities have always been caught in an awkward position between the two. The common sense curriculum frames the study of art and literature in the language of truth: it asks you to collect the data, to evaluate them, to draw conclusions as to their lasting worth and their place in the wider scheme of things. It does not promise to make sense of the world, to bring companionship or love, still less does it bring an offer of redemption. Young people are drawn to the humanities, however, because they have felt in themselves the need for something other than bare truth and argument. They are drawn by a primal human need, which is for the *rite of passage*, the transition into the community. The existence of this primal need was one of the major discoveries of French anthropology at the turn of the 20th century. And what quickly became clear in the wake of thinkers like Arnold Van Gennep and Claude Lévi-Strauss is that modern societies don’t provide for it. Rites of passage, in post-industrial society, are truncated or non-existent, and this is one reason why so many people find the escape from adolescence so hard.

So this is what held the old curriculum together: the call to membership in a pre-existing and self-defining order, embodied in the works of art, literature and music that had been shared and enjoyed by generations. But what was it, about those works, that *created* the call to membership? Why did so many people and for so long find these works to be precious, and feel the call to *belong* to them, and with them, in the journey through life?

I think I speak for many of my generation in saying that the idea that everything is political, and that our old curriculum stands or falls with the political order that sustained it, completely misses what we valued in that curriculum and what we learned from it. The very fact that we find it so difficult to say what we valued and what we learned is proof that it operated upon us in quite another way – not in the manner of a political exhortation, or a formula for the maintenance of our social order, but in something like the way that a liturgy operates on the heart and mind of the believer, or the face of the beloved on the soul of the lover. All the works of art and literature that we studied were presented as things that *belonged* to us. Even if they came down to us from a society wholly different from our own, like the epics of Homer; even if they had been, as it were, brought to us from strange and exotic places, like Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, they were *ours* and we belonged with them as they with us. It is this experience of belonging that defines, for me, a true humane education, and I want to say something about it since I believe it is in great danger of being misunderstood, as much by those who defend the old curriculum as by those who attack it.

**The Contrast with the Natural Sciences.**

There is a clear contrast in this respect with science and mathematics. These are not taught as forms of membership, and they are neutral with respect to the affections and loyalties of those who study them. Although they are objects of love among their devotees, they are not objects of belonging. I well remember studying mathematics at school, and being awestruck by the experience of *proving* something. It was as though I had entered another and enchanted realm, a place that had no dealings with the world of ordinary transient things, but which was irradiated from all eternity by the light of truth. This experience has been shared down the ages, and of course Plato makes it into a cornerstone of his philosophy, part of the proof that we rational beings do not really belong in this place where we find ourselves. But Plato, who made maths for that reason central to his curriculum, wished to banish the poets and the artists, and to exert strict control over the modes of music. In modern terms, he was opposed to a curriculum that attached young people to the things of this world, and wished to direct their eyes and their minds always beyond the horizon, to the place from which they had fallen into the prison of time.

But mathematics is not taught today as Plato would have taught it – as a discipline of the soul. It is taught as a realm of necessary truth, open to everyone, detached from any social or cultural inheritance, neither especially mine nor especially yours, but simply a form of knowledge. The same is true of the natural sciences, which offer neither membership nor consolation but simply a realm of free enquiry. They are uncontroversial – or controversial only when conscripted to some ideology that has nothing intrinsic to do with their results – as with Stalin’s recruitment of Lysensko, or the Nazis’ recruitment of eugenics.

Many defenders of the old curriculum in the humanities take their cue from this aspect of the sciences. They argue that the university is and ought to be a place of free enquiry, since only in this way can we guarantee that students will begaining knowledge rather than mere opinion from their studies. We should be as open to alternatives in our studies of literature, art and music as in the natural sciences. We should not reject works of art from the past on merely political or ideological grounds, or because they don’t fit in to our modern or post-modern prejudices. We should see them as the occasion to explore those prejudices, to examine them in the light of works that challenge them, and which compel us to ask the questions that we might otherwise seek to avoid. The great books, and great works are there on the curriculum because they put before us the big questions, and challenge us to answer those questions for ourselves.

There is a sense in which this is a legitimate riposte to those who say that the old curriculum was political, and should be challenged on political grounds. The old curriculum was political only in the sense that it was unavoidably marked by the social circumstances that gave rise to it, but the purpose of studying it was not to reinforce an ideology or fortify a system of power but to teach students to question those things, to engage in free enquiry along avenues that were too often blocked by prejudice, and in general to replace unthinking acquiescence with critical judgment, wherever those two were opposed.

Reasonable though that argument might be, however, it does not capture what is really at stake. The study of science and maths is connected with a certain reward, the reward of *knowledge.* When you have acquired that knowledge there is no special need to return to the source of it, and in some cases you would do best to throw your textbooks away. If studies in the humanities were like that, it would be sufficient to study the set works, and then *move on*. But, in an important sense, there *is* no moving on. The purpose of a humane education is not to instil a quantifiable mass of knowledge but to effect a change in consciousness – the change that comes from belonging to something larger than yourself. You can see this very clearly in the case of musical appreciation. Of course there is a lot of knowledge involved in the traditional curriculum – knowledge of a musicological kind. But the real point of the curriculum is to *acquaint* students with great works of music, and to ensure that these works have a place in their feelings. If there is knowledge involved it is knowledge how to listen and what to feel, rather than the knowledge of facts: the kind of knowledge that comes with culture.

I am homing in, here, on a debate that had a great impact on the Cambridge of my youth: the debate between Leavis and Snow concerning the ‘two cultures’. In his well-known Rede lecture of 1959, Snow argued that intellectual life had divided in two, and that the two ‘cultures’, as he called them, of science and the humanities were becoming increasingly opaque to each other. Snow also argued that the future of mankind depended upon bringing the two cultures together, so that science would once again be informed by an imaginative understanding of the human condition, and educated people supplied with real factual knowledge. It all seemed unexceptional and innocent, especially to Snow, who was an unexceptional and innocent person, an establishment figure who finished life as Lord Snow of Leicester, and who occupied blissful thrones in universities and advisory committees on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1962, however, the literary critic F.R. Leavis published, in the London *Spectator*, an attack on Snow’s lecture that was of extraordinary ferocity, contemptuously dismissing Snow as a talentless nonentity, and ridiculing the idea that science could be considered to be either a whole culture or a meaningful part of one. Unwittingly Snow had touched on what were to become for people of my generation the central questions faced by the modern university – the question of method in the humanities, and that of the nature and value of culture. And the ferocity of Leavis’s account stemmed from a source of which Leavis himself was, I think, largely unconscious, namely the fund of religious feeling on which our sense of membership is ultimately based.

Leavis believed that the great works that we study, or which we ought to study, owe their value to something that cannot be translated into its equivalent in scientific knowledge. There is another kind of knowledge that we gain from art, music and literature and this knowledge is not merely acquired: it is rehearsed. And here we touch on what is, I think, the clue to education in the humanities: that it leads nowhere. It is not the place of departure, from which you proceed to the accumulation of more expertise, more facts, more ‘research’. It is the place of arrival. You are entering a precinct whose point is revealed by being there. That is why we engage in close readings of classic texts, why we ponder the lines, the characters and the situations of the Shakespeare plays, why we study the structure of the Brahms symphonies, or the iconography of Tintoretto, and so on. We are learning to be *part* of these things, to shape our feelings and our responses to these works so as to be at home in the world that they create.

**Culture as Homecoming.**

But this ‘being at home’ in the world does not come easily, and not every way of teaching the great books will engender it. In his seminal book *Muße und Kult,* 1948, Leisure and Cult, Josef Pieper emphasized the origins of the practices that we now group together as culture – first the cult, in other words, the act of worship that unifies the tribe and creates the frame of membership, and second leisure, which enables people to rejoice in their membership, and to immortalize themselves and their feelings in art. All who inherit a high culture, as we do, are downstream from those primordial experiences. And we should return to them if we are to understand the deep appeal of high culture, and of the books and artworks into whose aura we wish to induct our students.

Many people engaged in teaching Great books programs find themselves, in this connection, faced with a quandary, and it was a quandary that Leavis experienced too. The books that demand our attention include many which cannot be understood in purely secular terms, like the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, and many which are core texts of the Judaeo-Christian faiths, like the English Bible. Some of the Great Books, admittedly, are outgrowths of dead religions – notably the epics of Homer and Virgil. Some are the work of atheists and agnostics, more concerned to show the social world, in the manner of George Eliot, as a purely human creation. But we cannot eliminate the central core of religious texts and give a cogent picture of the remainder. It is not only the language and the characters of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* that constantly return us, in thought, to the Christian religion. It is the social milieu, the store of emotions, the interplay of ideals and realities, that require us, in making sense of the story she tells, to call upon the legacy of English faith. Teaching a Great Books program as though the Christian religion were a passing eccentricity of some of the authors involved in it, would not be a way of *teaching* it, since it would precisely by-pass what the program has to offer, which is that experience of homecoming, of arriving, which is the true purpose of an education in the humanities. The point is even more obvious if we turn our attention away from literature towards music and the visual arts.

We cannot teach students to appreciate our musical tradition if we do not teach Bach; and we cannot teach Bach without recognising that every note that he wrote was written in a spirit of religious devotion. Nothing that Bach did can be detached from the Lutheran vision of human destiny, and he so shaped the language of counterpoint that all subsequent use of it, from Mozart to Schoenberg and beyond, is marked by its religious meaning. Likewise there is no way of teaching people to appreciate painting in our tradition that does not centre on an iconography that is profoundly Christian – an iconography that survives into the modern period, and is called upon even by those painters like Manet and the Impressionists, who explicitly turn their attention away from the altar towards the incidents of modern life.

**The Return to the Sacred.**

So the question arises, just what our attitude should be to the religious aspect of our cultural legacy, and how to emphasize it, if we must, without insisting on its truth? Here are two thoughts, by way of an answer. First we should take seriously the suggestion that culture is ultimately derived from the cult. A cult depends upon two vital components: first the community of the faithful, who may not be united in their beliefs, but who are united in their religious obedience; secondly the shared liturgies and rituals, through which the place, the words, the actions at the altar, and the deity himself become sacred. The important feature of liturgies and religious ceremonies is that they must be constantly rehearsed. They are a ‘coming together’ in which, through formal words and gestures, our emotions and thoughts are raised to a higher level of seriousness, we are purged of triviality and self-obsession and joined, for however brief a moment, with our fellow worshippers on a higher level than we are ever joined in our day-to-day transactions.

This ‘rehearsing’ of the experience of membership, through ritualised gestures and words, is a fundamental human experience, and offers a kind of paradigm of the higher life. During these moments we exist in a more solemn, more elevated and more blessed state, and even if it is only our cooperative activity that achieves this, even if there is no god who reaches to us through the incense-laden air, we are nevertheless granted a vision of life as intrinsically valuable and intrinsically shared. This vision transforms our everyday experience, but it must be constantly rehearsed and renewed, since it is the point of *arrival*, the entering into the real presence, and the reception of the communal blessing.

You can go on to say that there is a kind of knowledge involved here too – a knowledge of the heart and of the meaning of community. But it is the repetition that comes first: the liturgy and the ritual are points of rest, to which you return from your outward ventures, and which renew you because they tell you what you truly are – namely a *member* of this community.

My second thought is this: the primordial experience of the cult is quite distinct from any rational theology that would explain it. What is given to us, in ritual and liturgy, is an original experience of the sacred. We may attach that experience to a god; but we may simply accept it for what it is, a real presence, a making immanent of the transcendental, an encounter, as I prefer to put it, with the soul of the world.

Great works of art draw on those two features of the cult. They invite another kind of attention than is invited by scientific knowledge – not the gathering of information, but the repetition of a cherished experience. We are invited into their presence and offered exactly what we were offered the last time, and of which we cannot have enough. And in their presence we experience a kind of belonging – our hearts and minds coincide with theirs, in something like the way that the hearts and minds of a congregation coincide in the act of worship.

Great works of art are also, to a large extent and in many ways, rooted in the experience of the sacred. They present us with images, moments, characters, situations that stand out from ordinary reality, and stand out often in their very ordinariness, as though visiting us from another realm. I would single out Shakespeare for particular attention in this respect. Although references to the Christian faith in his plays are muted and ambiguous, the idea of the ‘transcendental made immanent’ is constantly at work, in his poetry, and in his characters. Always, whether ruled by virtue or by vice, Shakespeare’s characters take us to the very edge of things, to the horizon where our humanity opens out to a completed version of itself – so it is with the virginal love of Miranda, the metaphysical angst of Hamlet, the flamboyant embodiment of Cleopatra, the vanity of Lear and the systematic malice of Iago – these are human particulars driven to the edge of the universal, to become god-like versions of our virtues and vices. And their full-blooded, imagistic language brings them back from the realm of pure abstractions and makes them vivid and immediate to our senses.

But it is not only Shakespeare who inducts us, in this way, into the experience of sacred things. It is, I believe, the peculiar property of high art in all its forms that it speak to us from another realm. Its message is ‘attend to this’; it tells its tale for no other purpose, and asks for an attention that is not the pragmatic, utilitarian attention that we devote to our sensuous appetites, but the very same attention that is demanded by liturgy and prayer. It asks us to attend to the secret voices that surround us, to the hidden messages that tells us what we truly are, but which can never be translated into the plain prose of science.

I would venture, therefore, an explanation as to why teaching the humanities we need to have recourse to a tradition of touchstones, as Arnold called them, and to acquaint students with these things. What we are offering is not factual knowledge but membership of a community of feeling. We are providing students with the sources to which they can return again and again for refreshment, with a view to lifting their emotions and their sympathies to a higher level, where the human heart is at rest with itself, certain of its value. And we are conveying to them a primary experience of the sacred, transfigured in all the ways that art transfigures things, so as to remake even the most ordinary life as though it were a visitor from the transcendental. When we include the Bible, Dante, and Milton in our curriculum, as when we include Bach, Mozart and Haydn, and Botticelli, Michelangelo and Tintoretto, we do not need to sanitize these things, to pretend that their religious meaning is something other than their value as art. For almost all art has its roots in religious feeling, and what is being offered, in any cogent course that refers to the real masterworks, is an experience of membership in which the sense of the sacred is perpetuated, and offered freely even to those who do not or cannot believe in its origin.

Of course, we should not exaggerate what we can achieve through introducing the classical sources to the young. Human beings live in darkness, and often, when I think of the great masterpieces of the past, what they have meant to me and what they can mean to a young person today, an image comes to mind of a man wandering at night in a vast museum, where great dark torsos stand in silence on their pedestals. He has only the narrow beam of a torch to guide him, yet, every now and then, he lifts it from the floor beneath him, and plays it across those eerie forms, illuminating here a face, there a hand and – in the distance – whole forms of gods and heroes. The further the figures stand from him, the more of them he sees – but also the more faintly. This is how the works of our civilisation enter our lives, as we cast over them the light of some present emotion. Those who live without that emotion and who – whether contentedly or fearfully – sit down in the dark, see nothing of the eerie grandeur all around. But those who see it are exalted, terrified and overwhelmed by turns. And they know that, for all its vastness and strangeness, this place is a place where they belong, and where life is its own vindication.

I guess that is my answer to Plato’s allegory of the cave.

1. Eugene W. Holland, ‘From Schizophrenia to Social Control’, in Eleanor Kaufman and Kevin Jon Heller, eds. *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy and Culture,* Minneapolis and London, U. Minn. Press, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gary Genosko, ‘Guattari’s Schizoanalytic semiotics’ in *ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Impostures intellectuelles*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1997, published in America as *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science*, London, Profile Books, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Mensonge: My Strange Quest for Henri Mensonge, Structuralism’s Hidden Hero*, London, King Penguin, 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)