

THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

The Challenging Nature of the Humanities

Commencement Day Address

June 4, 1998

I WANT TO OFFER some thoughts on the challenging nature of the humanities, on their strong links to other fields of learning, and on why they are essential, not only to any serious definition of education, but also to the health of society as a whole.

The humanities – together with the arts – are obviously not very tidy. They include all the known religions and philosophies, as well as languages, literatures, histories, and cultures, with their varieties of music, theater, dance, and visual arts. The kind of knowledge they offer us is not susceptible to elegant proofs, such as we find in mathematics; or to parsimonious theories together with verifiable data; or anything as neat as an econometric model or a rational-choice decision-making tree; or even much in the way of game theory.

Instead, the humanities and the arts thrive on the pattern, texture, and flux of experience, where very little is provable or predictable. They are less abstract in what they consider to be

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knowledge than either the sciences or the social sciences. They prefer the audible, tangible, visual, and palpable. When we are reading *Anna Karenina* or *Dubliners*; when we are watching *Othello* or *Riders to the Sea*; when we are wrestling with Thucydides, or reciting Keats, Yeats, or Seamus Heaney, we know that we are about as close to the vital signs of human experience as any representation is likely to take us.

Obviously, there are exceptions. The humanities and arts have their own special forms of abstraction – in philosophy and music, for example. And we know only too well that history, art history, literary history, and theory can all become as vivisectional and obscurantist as we care to make them.

Nonetheless, there is nearly always in humanistic and artistic fields a strong pull that ultimately leads us back to an original source – a particular novel, painting, poem, or string quartet; or a great philosophical, historical, or religious text that can dramatize and reimagine life in ways that expand our vision and deepen our sense of what is possible, delightful, terrible, or impenetrable: in short, something that can enlighten us, move us, and genuinely educate us.

What does it mean to learn – or to gain knowledge – in this way?

The purpose is not so much closure along a single line of inquiry, as we might find in the sciences. The search, instead, is for illuminations that are hard-won because they can be discovered only in the very midst of life, with all its vicissitudes. If we are fortunate and alert, we may gradually learn how to see more clearly the nature and possible meaning of situations and events; to be better attuned to the nuances, inflections, and character of other human beings; to weigh values with more precision; to judge on the basis of increasingly fine distinctions; and perhaps to become more effective, generous, and wise in our actions.

As we think about these special characteristics of the humanities, however, we also soon discover that it is extremely difficult

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to draw a convincing or firm line between these particular fields and those of the social and natural sciences. It is not possible, for instance, to read very far into major humanistic texts – such as the works of Aristotle, or Plato’s *Republic* – without being thrust into questions about political theory and practice; the role of law in human societies; civic as compared to moral obligations; physics as well as metaphysics; economics, cosmology, and even the nature of plants and animals. Great humanistic texts, in other words, lead us very quickly into other realms of knowledge; and conversely, great scientific work, if we really want to understand it, will lead us straight back into the domain of the humanities and the arts.

The great Harvard evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr has recently reminded us of this point, suggesting – for example – that the biological sciences depend upon constructing and interpreting important concepts that bring them into close touch with major humanistic ideas, as well as with several fields in the social sciences. Biologists need to define and try to explain, for instance, complex processes such as development, cognition, and evolution, as well as communication, learning, “territoriality,” and even altruism. All of these concepts connect many forms of animal life with human life – and they all lie as much in the sphere of the humanities as of the natural or social sciences. In fact, without significant contributions from the humanities, the hard task of clarifying, examining, and refining the meaning of these concepts cannot be carried out persuasively. Precisely the same point holds, of course, for concepts closely associated with the sciences themselves: “cause and effect,” “determined behavior,” and even time, space, or dimension.

The traffic must move in both directions. The humanities are essential to science and social science; at the same time, science and social science have obviously had a significant impact on humanistic thinking, especially since the seventeenth century, and nowhere more dramatically than in the case of Charles Darwin. His ideas, as

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we know, had a profound effect on established religious beliefs, on metaphysics and philosophy of mind, and (by extension) on all the factors that we take into account whenever we think about the various perceptions, drives, motives, and values – as well as the powers of reason, imagination, and memory – that make up our idea of the Self, what it means to have a Self, or to be a Self. In short, although all knowledge may not constitute a unity, there is a very strong case to be made for its “interconnectedness,” a different – but far from trivial – matter.

This interconnectedness means that the humanities cannot, in effect, be successfully subjected to any paradigm of knowledge imported from either science or social science – any more than the reverse would be acceptable. When it comes to central questions about the nature and meaning of human life, neither the humanities, the sciences, nor the social sciences can be sovereign.

These essential linkages among these broad fields – the ways that they need each other and must work together – are strikingly apparent in Harvard’s interfaculty program called “Mind, Brain, and Behavior,” which cuts across nearly all the schools and departments of the University, bringing the insights of neuroscientists and biologists into direct contact with those of cognitive psychologists and of scholars in law, business, government, religion, literature, philosophy, and other fields.

Recent developments in magnetic resonance imaging and rapid advances in other technologies now allow scientists to observe and map neural activity in the brain with amazing accuracy, explaining much about how neurons transmit their signals and how the signals pass from one cell to another. But neuroscience cannot, on its own, explain how chemical signals somehow turn into human emotions, thoughts, and feelings – or how they lead to self-conscious action and behavior, in all their complexity. Above all, neuroscience cannot, on its own, provide an understanding of the concept of “mind” with its “mental functions” – functions that are obviously distinct from the chemistry,

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physics, and biology that make up that apparatus which we call “the brain.”

The realm of the mind is, in fact, exactly the place where the humanities and the arts become crucial and indispensable. We cannot demonstrate exactly what a “mind” is because we can neither observe it nor account for it in strictly scientific terms. But we know that only a “mind” has consciousness, which in turn allows us to have a sense of Self, with its continuous identity and history, its capacity to think and arrive at conclusions, to make free choices, and to develop *culturally* – long after the time when the brain has ceased, in any significant way, to evolve *biologically*.

It is also in this region of the mind – of consciousness, of reflection in the light of experience, of choice and deliberate action – that “values” are created. Whenever we reach a decision, or make a reasoned judgment, we do not express a mere preference: we create a value. And the humanities and arts are those fields which are most deeply and continuously engaged with probing, dramatizing, and clarifying values.

To do this, they must draw not only on specific fields of knowledge but also on human experience: on encounters with the actual flux of life, where the mind attempts to make sense of what it is perceiving, of what meaning and value a particular incident or situation may have.

Henry James, in his great essay “The Art of Fiction,” captured in a very few words what it means to learn from – and to write from – experience that has been sifted and evaluated until it begins to take on meanings:

What kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end? Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative... it takes to itself the

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*faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.*¹

When we talk about the humanities and the arts, among the things we surely have in mind are the enlarged capacities or powers that these fields can help us to develop, and that can make it possible for us to interpret experience with greater insight. For James, the important capacities were a constantly cultivated and finely tuned sensibility; a heightened consciousness, always on the alert; and an imaginative mind with its own “atmosphere” – its own accumulated store of impressions and perceptions that have been filtered, named, and somehow organized so that new encounters with even small particles of experience can be registered so precisely that they yield “revelations” of significant meaning, so long as we are awake enough to see them and “convert” them.

Whether we believe that this is how an imaginative and powerful mind actually works is not so much the point. What *does* matter is that the passage can hardly help but illuminate something important about the quality of our interior life, as we experience it; about how consciousness can be tuned and even mobilized; about how we can learn enough to be prepared for revelations, however small or large, when they come. In short, the passage compels us to envisage the mind – and how it works – in new ways.

In closing, I want to touch very briefly on one more critical role of the humanities: that is, the fundamental contribution that the humanities can and must make to the health of democratic societies and to international cooperation in the world today.

If the humanities and the arts are the realm where experience is encountered directly and dramatized, as well as filtered and evaluated, and where values are clarified and modified under the pressures of existence, we should remember that they are also the spheres in which different values can collide or clash: sometimes amicably, sometimes acrimoniously, and often tragically.

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We do not have to describe particular examples in order to remember the nationalistic, religious, racial, ethnic, and social conflicts of this century – some of which have now been quieted, while others rage even as we speak. Here, the humanities can help, not so much by stressing the importance of strong convictions and commitments as by reminding us of our limitations and fallibility. They can help us to cultivate a respect for the more modest but vital values of tolerance, restraint, compromise, and a readiness to entertain the possibility that we may often be wrong.

The late Isaiah Berlin, in his wonderful book *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, held out the hope that these inevitable clashes and collisions of value “even if they cannot be avoided, can be softened.”

The first public obligation is to avoid extremes of suffering. Revolutions, wars, assassinations, extreme measures may in desperate situations be required. But history teaches us that their consequences are seldom what is anticipated; there is no guarantee, not even, at times, a high enough probability, that such acts will lead to improvement.... So we must engage in what are called trade-offs – rules, values, principles must yield to each other in varying degrees in specific situations.... The best that can be done, as a general rule, is to maintain a precarious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices – that is the first requirement for a decent society....²

Isaiah Berlin was a humanist first, and a philosopher second: he understood that important values are given meaning and expression by the force of strong convictions. But he also knew that strong convictions, if carried forward with unmitigated ferocity, can also destroy human values.

There is, alas, no easy way to inject such wisdom into the world at large. But it is just such wisdom, grounded in a respect for human rights and human values, that the humanities and arts

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can offer. This wisdom may or may not prevail, but without great and humane minds to articulate such a vision, we will have no chance at all of achieving our deepest purposes.

- 1 Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *Partial Portraits* (1888; reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 388.
- 2 Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 17–18.

A Perpetual Visual Motion Machine

The 100th Anniversary of the Fogg Museum

November 3, 1995

THE GIFT that made the Fogg Museum a reality came without any warning or expectation. It floated down upon Harvard, in 1891, as a bequest from Mrs. Elizabeth Perkins Fogg.

Neither Mrs. Fogg nor her late husband had any direct affiliation with Harvard. The benefactor provided \$200,000 to construct a building “for the collection and exhibition of works of art of every description, and for education and enlightenment of the people.”

Nothing more elaborate than that. No restrictions on the deed of gift. No hint as to how this ambitious goal should be achieved. And certainly no limits placed on the aspirations of either the Museum or the multitudinous people who might come to seek enlightenment.

Surprisingly, the \$200,000 actually proved enough to engage the services of one of America’s best-known architects – Richard Morris Hunt – and to pay the full costs of Mr. Hunt’s rectangular beaux arts marble neoclassical boxlike edifice, which, to judge from old photographs, looked uncomfortably compact, and inflexibly travertine.

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Indeed, within a very few years, our first director – Edward Forbes – complained that the new museum was “a building with a lecture hall in which you could not hear, a gallery in which you could not see, working rooms in which you could not work, and a roof that leaked” – helpful neither to the Museum’s collection of paintings and photographs, nor (worse yet) to its water-soluble plaster casts.

No matter. The collections grew, works of every conceivable description arrived, and the “people” – as Mrs. Fogg had hoped – were apparently educated and enlightened. Then, in 1924, Harvard undertook a massive fund-raising campaign. The University’s goal was to raise the unprecedented sum of \$10 million. Of that total, \$1 million was designated for the Fogg: Mr. Hunt’s marble mausoleum was slated for discreet demolition, and a new Italianate structure was designed to take the place of the existing Roman rectangle.

The \$1 million was promptly raised. A new and pleasant palazzo appeared on Quincy Street and was widely applauded. The Fogg as we know it now – more or less – settled in comfortably for the next several centuries.

We are familiar with much of the history that has unfolded since that time: the stream of gifts of stunning objects; the development of the library and conservation center; the continued growth of the Art Department – from our one lone Norton Professor of a century ago; and most of all, the constant attention to Mrs. Fogg’s original vision of education in all its forms, through the presentation and use of the collections – in the galleries, in special exhibitions, in relation to teaching and advanced research and students’ independent work, and so much else.

All of which is to say that the Fogg is in some respects not strictly a museum at all. It is a vivacious university center: a center for the mind and heart and eye; for intellect, taste, and imagination; for students, faculty, conservators, librarians, professionals, amateurs, visitors, and pilgrims of every kind. It is a nerve center

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that energizes and helps to organize many of the ways that we encounter and reflect about art in a great university devoted to learning, and also to life.

Let me say a few words about how some of this learning actually takes place – and how it can affect our lives.

I have tried to remember a few of my own first visits to the Fogg, and what I learned from them. They began thirty-five years ago, when I arrived at Harvard as a graduate student in English literature. My first impression was that our Quincy Street palazzo was not quite like any museum that I had seen before: no splendid long gilded galleries, no grand staircase or any other obvious flourish of architectural rhetoric – and certainly not the cool lucidity of an indoor-outdoor *casa moderna*.

I entered by the front door and began to wander, without a compass, not quite knowing where one ought to begin, or which was the right direction to turn. I was surprised but pleased to discover that the Fogg was constructed like a film by Godard, where every room or corridor or stairwell seemed as much a middle as a beginning – and where there was fortunately no end at all, but something more like a perpetual visual motion machine.

At the top of my first set of stairs, turning the corner, I encountered that striking blessed damozel painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti: not like the portrait of any woman I had ever seen; quite stunning to a neophyte like myself, and so quintessentially pre-Raphaelite that if I had never again seen another similar work, the style would have left its permanent imprint on my admittedly impressionable imagination.

At the time, of course, I had never heard of Rossetti except as a poet; so much the better, because the painting struck me like a kind of projectile from out of the blue: an unidentifiable flying object that had neither name nor label nor provenance to commend it. It came free of pre-established expectations, or any bothersome baggage of prior knowledge, on my part. Fortunate: because I know that if someone had told me, before my visit, to seek out a

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large oil painting by a Victorian English artist whose first name was Dante, I am certain that I would not have gone near the picture – then, or probably throughout my entire graduate student career.

Thus the Fogg began to teach me in its own labyrinthine ways. One day, I stumbled unaware upon the late Botticelli *Crucifixion* – another completely foreign object to me: strange, involuted, animated, contorted, yet full of mysterious grace. Was this the same Botticelli whom I thought I knew – the Botticelli of whom Peter Ustinov once said that if he were alive today, he would be working for *Vogue* magazine? Apparently it was – the very same Botticelli. My learning, and even my enlightenment, proceeded apace.

I won't go on, except to say that I happened upon object after object – or rather the objects seemed to happen upon me. My factual knowledge was slender – most of the dates, and some of the names, came later. But what I brought away from these early excursions into the Fogg and mist were all those new images, and the experience of suddenly encountering them, revisiting them, reflecting on them, and somehow drawing nourishment, energy, and even confidence from them. Because any great achievement of the imagination, realized in art, nourishes our sources of hope and confidence, and gives substance to our conviction that human beings are capable of extraordinary acts – acts of aspiration and creation.

Melodic Transgressions

Introduction of John Harbison '60

Arts First Medalist

May 6, 2000

WHEN I WAS a first-year undergraduate at Princeton in 1952, the course I most wanted to sign up for was a famous canonical hit called “Ren and Ref” (“Renaissance and Reformation”). It was taught by Professor E. H. Harbison, John’s father, who was known to be not only a fine historian and teacher, but also, in his private life, a composer and musician.

Later, that course took on a greater and intriguing symbolic meaning for me, and came to represent the unresolved dichotomy of Princeton – at least the Princeton of my own era: the fascination with, and indulgence in, stylized excess, juxtaposed with an equally powerful need for Presbyterian or Calvinistic self-purgation and constant moral scrupulousness. In the Renaissance part of Professor Harbison’s course, we encountered all those dubious, extravagant, amorous, venal, and aesthetic Medicean and Borgiasque cardinals and popes, who were then followed so swiftly by Savonarola’s sackcloth; by the Reformation’s Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin – people who generally disliked large outdoor parties and who reinvented the concept of “Arts Last.”

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Any institution that had the puritan Jonathan Edwards as one of its earliest presidents, Woodrow Wilson as its greatest recent public figure, and F. Scott Fitzgerald as its most famous unshakable literary icon was bound – at least in the 1950s – to have some form of deep psychic angst at its core. To jazz or not to jazz? That was at least *one* of the abiding dilemmas. And Professor Harbison, reigning over “Ren and Ref,” seemed to me to embody and nearly to resolve, in an especially gracious way, the university’s heritage of threatening antinomies: he was witty, but serious and demanding as a teacher; kind and even indulgent, but full of a certain sobriety; a slightly self-effacing historian in public and, apparently, an imaginative, expressive musician in private.

I do not want at all to suggest that John Harbison, who has generously agreed to share this weekend with us, had somehow (when he was growing up) to deal with the entire symbolic burden of Princeton’s rich but also dichotomous history. It is true that he and I were both there when the shadows of Woodrow Wilson, who had died only a little more than three decades earlier, and Fitzgerald, who had died barely a decade earlier, were very much in evidence. Nevertheless, John was already discovering alchemical ways to transmute Princeton’s paradoxes into something rich and strange, without having to re-enact for himself a dialectical drama of stark choice between extremes – a sort of *Harbison Agonistes* – and without simply seeking some easy but incoherent amalgam of the great variety of musical and other traditions that he realized might be accessible to him.

By the time John was twelve, he had formed his own jazz group; he had been listening to radio broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera every week; he was playing some Beethoven on the piano, coming in touch with New York musical comedy, and talking with Roger Sessions (who was then teaching at Princeton) about twentieth-century music.

His most significant musical exemplars were evident early in his life: Bach, especially the cantatas; Stravinsky; Thelonious Monk

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and other jazz greats such as Coltrane; figures from American popular music (Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Irving Berlin, Hammerstein); and opera, spanning at least Mozart and Verdi to Debussy's *Pelléas* and beyond.

In other words, from the beginning John did not so much struggle with, but rather absorbed and began to take as “given,” several traditions – several musical canons that he made his own, essentially because he was so strongly drawn to them, and riveted by them.

This is not to say that the going was always easy. At Harvard, in the face of an austere historical approach to the study of “classical” music (if one can use that term), John discovered that the then Music Department's conception of history stopped somewhere in the nineteenth century, and he had to make a special case for wanting to press further. Later, when he returned to Princeton to study composition, he ran into a different kind of orthodoxy, based on twelve-tone and atonal modernist traditions. John held out for a wider range that could include transgressions that were melodic in nature. This left him rather on the periphery of things at Princeton, and he still remembers the day when one of his classmates turned to him and said: “You're really just a tune man, aren't you?”

John *isn't* “just a tune man” any more than he is “just” anything else. He has his modernist severities, moments of jazzmania, of melodic arias and other arresting complexities. Most of all, he has the capacity to manage, with extraordinary ease of transition, the shifts and moves from one set of stylistic allusions to another in a way that is unsurpassed among contemporary composers.

All of these talents are nowhere more in evidence than in John's most recent major work, his opera *The Great Gatsby*, which premiered at the Metropolitan this past winter. Quite apart from its boldness and its insistence that the music (not the “plot,” so to speak) must carry the work, John clearly gathered up in this work a very great deal from his decades of immersion in so many dif-

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ferent kinds of art: returning to Fitzgerald, and *Gatsby*, with all their own internal contradictions and burdens; to jazz and swing and popular music; to the stringencies of modernist recitative, and the constraints of modernist arias. John, of course, concentrated in literature – not music – through most of his undergraduate time at Harvard; so it is not surprising that he should have used a quintessential American text, a Jazz Age text, and really a Princeton text, as the grounding for this major public entry into opera.

But if John's *Gatsby* gathers together and intertwines a great deal of the past, it also obviously looks outward in a new way to an open future. Over the course of his career, John has composed string quartets, symphonies, other operas, and a cantata, among much else. Like all formidable composers, he keeps coming back for yet another act, in an age that is less than hospitable to contemporary music. It takes not only talent and commitment, but no little courage and poise, to carry forward in this way. Happily, the world has often recognized John's capacities. He has been a Guggenheim Fellow and a MacArthur Fellow; in 1980, he won the Kennedy Center Friedheim Award for his *Piano Concerto*; and in 1987, he won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Flight into Egypt*. He has been composer-in-residence at any number of places, from CalArts to Aspen to the American Academy in Rome. In short, in his invariably modest, reflective, impassioned, but also intellectually disinterested way, he has, in effect, done it all. Harvard and Arts First are honored to have him here among us.

Testing the Limits

*Remarks at the Opening of the Ellsworth Kelly Exhibition
Sackler Museum, March 4, 1999*

I WOULD LIKE to make a few remarks, from a purely personal point of view, about Ellsworth Kelly's work.

I am not certain that I know any art that is more demanding or more difficult than Ellsworth's – notwithstanding the fact that it is so often radiant, so full of invitation, and seems (sometimes) to be so disarmingly accessible.

But when we consider the infinite repertoire of worldly and otherworldly objects that one might draw or paint or sculpt; the range of techniques one might use; the kinds of gesture and illusion one might create – when we think of this entire array of capacities that has been available to artists throughout much of history – then Ellsworth's work seems like a marvelously radical and continuing exercise in self-denial. So much of his art depends on everything that he has *eliminated* from the work, including any of the ordinary traces of the artist as a presence who clearly “creates” either as interventionist, composer, image-maker, or magician.

The journey that I feel I am asked to take with Ellsworth is in one sense a journey of deliberate renunciation and deprivation –

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granted that what we ultimately discover more than compensates for all that he has sacrificed. For me, at least, the rewards of his art reflect the enormous achievement of a visual sensibility and intelligence that have been purified to the point where every nuance and inflection, in each new piece, every shade and tone and value, matters absolutely. Every move that might all too easily lapse into something familiar or merely imperfect, or into an imitation of previous moves – all that has been avoided. As a result, we are forced to try to “see,” with each new revelation, what we are actually looking at: what a particular new juxtaposition of shapes and colors, or the silent presence of a new solitary object, seems to indicate; what seems to have shifted since the previous chapter of Ellsworth’s work; what readjustment of nearly indiscernible weights and balances has occurred, demanding that we respond – testing the limits of our capacity – to the differences we sense, or the meanings that have suddenly been discovered.

T. S. Eliot once remarked that we can only get the better of words for those things we no longer want to say. For Ellsworth (as for Eliot) the constant effort is to find “objective correlatives” for those new perceptions that one’s intuition and sensibility have somehow grasped, but that one is still struggling to articulate and clarify in art, using whatever equipment – whether words, or shapes and colors – one has available.

Ellsworth, we celebrate all that you have given us over many years – for helping us to see what we had missed, or what had simply never existed before you brought it into being. Most of all, we toast your presence among us, your friendship, and your unwillingness to tolerate – whether in work or in life – anything less than what has been purified, perfected, and only then “presented.”

Firmly Grounded Ideas

Commencement Day Address

June 8, 2000

WE ARE VERY PRIVILEGED to have with us today Seamus Heaney and Amartya Sen, both Nobel Laureates, both long associated with Harvard University, and both committed to the central values embodied in a great university such as ours.

Their presence here gives us the chance to reflect on the ways in which both of them – each in his own field – have explored ideas about the nature of a good society and of a fulfilling life. As we do so, we will, I think, discover some important common threads that link their experiences, their concerns, and their commitments.

Seamus Heaney and Amartya Sen were each born in lands – Ireland and India – that have, during the last century, been torn by colonial strife, as well as by religious and political conflict. Both have lived international lives, remaining strongly attached to their homelands while also cultivating the kind of considered disinterestedness that comes from caring – but not caring so totally as to allow themselves to become imprisoned by the local circumstances into which they were born.

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As a result, both Seamus and Amartya have continuously sought to expand their vision, to seek more inclusive as well as firmly grounded ideas concerning the essential elements of a healthy and just society. Both have clearly chosen not to be exiles – and certainly not expatriates. Instead, they have become purposeful wanderers and explorers, with deep roots at home, yet roots that have allowed them to flourish abroad, precisely because they have taken nourishment from their relation to what is local and indigenous, while testing that heritage and its values against their experience of the wider world in which they have lived and journeyed.

Seamus Heaney's poetry has, inevitably, had to come to terms with the religious and political conflict in Northern Ireland, where he spent the first decades of his life. He has had to decide – under great pressure – how far to become engaged politically, or whether to leave his native city, Belfast. He has had to judge the moral weight that such choices might exert on the character of his life and the spirit level of his verse. As a result, the complexity of the act of choosing, the importance of having the freedom to choose, and the need to understand the implications of one's choices have all had their bearing on the substance and the texture of his poetry.

Meanwhile, Amartya Sen's view of economics has, from the beginning, been grounded in moral philosophy and political theory, in problems of justice, of human and societal development, and of moral choice. He has worked to show how certain fundamental freedoms and rights – including such things as the right to an education and to basic health care – are essential for individual fulfillment and for the functioning of a healthy society.

Therefore, I think of both Seamus Heaney and Amartya Sen primarily as humanists, very much kin to one another and always preoccupied with those questions with which the humanities, arts, and social sciences have traditionally been engaged: how – and even where – to live; how to define one's obligations and

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responsibilities, not only to society but to oneself; how to exercise one's freedoms and rights wisely; how to enable societies to be productive and also just; and finally, how to use words – whether in poetry or in prose – precisely, faithfully, and lyrically so that we do not sow even more confusion than already exists in the world, either through the willful distortion and crude simplification of language and meanings, or through any careless disregard for the intellectual and imaginative stringency necessary to the task of articulating truths.

If Heaney and Sen often pose similar questions, they also resemble one another in cherishing many of the same values – above all, the value of freedom. Neither of them views freedom as a promise of something without boundaries, something purely liberating.

Instead, they would characterize it as the opportunity to define one's own commitments among possible glimpsed alternatives. Freedom allows us to choose, not the boundless, but the ways in which we ourselves wish to be bounded, pursuing whatever we believe might nurture greater hope and more communal trust.

To arrive at moments or points along the way when values and purposes that are positive seem capable of holding sway over forces that are corrosive or destructive; to have the capacity to activate those energies and aspirations which can help us give more satisfying shape to our lives and to our societies: these have been fundamental motives behind the quests that Seamus Heaney and Amartya Sen have both undertaken. And, clearly, neither quest would have been even conceivable if the kind of freedom I mentioned a few moments ago had not been cultivated by them and available to them.

If we step back to consider some significant movements or developments that have been especially significant in the twentieth century – and that also relate in important ways to Seamus and Amartya – then at least two major patterns, I believe, stand out.

First, there has been the unprecedented scale of mass war-

fare, including the subjugation, displacement, and forced exile of so many millions of people. These events have had several causes, but high among them have been one or another kind of expansionist ideology: some motivated by beguiling utopian visions of seemingly ideal societies that might be created, others based on distorted conceptions of transcendent national, racial, or religious power.

After a century of such experience, the climate of much world opinion has shifted in very important ways. The illusory romanticism or pride that tempted many to dream of unbounded *Lebensraum* or the promise of brave new worlds has actually been diminished. The cost of such illusions is now seen, in large measure, as being simply too high, and the level of present disenchantment is simply too great.

As our contemporary inheritance, we now live with a special form of difficult realism – but a realism that can also accommodate certain forms of equally difficult idealism: both grounded in a recognition of the fact that the use of force in human affairs must be far more limited than in earlier eras, and that utopian visions must be continuously resisted.

The second of the two twentieth-century movements or developments I would highlight has been the steady, growing conviction – affecting more countries and regions, as well as individuals – that freedom is a fundamental human value that must not be alienated.

During the past hundred years, dozens of colonies have ceased to be ruled by foreign states. Even in the last decade or so, we have seen the former Soviet Union crumble; apartheid in South Africa fall; several authoritarian regimes in Latin America vanish; and steady, however inadequate, steps toward peace in the Middle East, Ireland, and elsewhere.

We know, however, that such freedom certainly does not come easily, that it is hard to sustain, and that it is always vulnerable to forces waiting to undermine it. Nevertheless, by any measure, the balance sheet concerning the extent of freedom in the

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world today, as compared with a century ago, unquestionably shows a vast increase.

In the context of the two twentieth-century patterns that I have just mentioned, Seamus Heaney and Amartya Sen seem to me to be emblematic figures – “relics and types” of important aspects of the past century’s experience.

Both, as I suggested earlier, have been schooled as witnesses to conflict and war – the often unyielding ferocity and exiguousness that have so wounded so much of our recent history. Both Seamus and Amartya have, as their intuitive heritage, that kind of unenchanted realism which also contains within itself the sources of, and resources for, sustained hope and well-tempered idealism. Both have resisted, therefore, the pressure to overpromise or to overprescribe, although both have also helped us to see and celebrate humane values and possible ways of leading satisfying lives that have shape and form, and that sometimes may shine forth.

They offer us not blueprints or designs, and certainly not illusory visions, but fruitful, reasoned, imaginative, and tested ways to conceive of how a good society might be animated and ordered; how an individual wanderer and explorer, devoted to poetry or to economics – or indeed to any deep vocation – might find a proper habitation and a name over the course of a lifetime, a lifetime committed to the kinds of freedom which offer scope and room, but that are also lovingly bounded; even how a university such as Harvard, devoted to its own vocation, might be continuously energized in its pursuits, because our books do indeed stand open and our gates unbarred.

In closing, I want to leave you with some lines spoken by Seamus Heaney in 1995, on the occasion of his receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature:

As writers and readers, as sinners and citizens, we have developed a realism and an aesthetic sense that make us wary of crediting the positive note.... Only the very stupid or the very deprived can any longer help knowing that the documents of civilization have been

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written in blood and tears. . . . And when this intellectual predisposition coexists with the actualities of Ulster and Israel and Bosnia and Rwanda and a host of other wounded spots on the face of the earth, the inclination is not only not to credit human nature with much constructive potential but not to credit anything too positive in the work of art.

Which is why for years I was bowed to the desk like some monk . . . in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect. . . . Then finally and happily, and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in despite of them, I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous.¹

Seamus then went on to suggest the “need on the one hand for a truth-telling that will be hard and retributive, and on the other hand the need not to harden the mind to a point where it denies its own yearnings for sweetness and trust.”

This invitation to allow our own yearnings and trust to emerge and take hold, this accommodation for the miraculous as well as the murderous, has marked the lives and works of our two speakers. And so we celebrate them – as we do this university – for being so committed (in Seamus’ words) to “freedom like this”: freedom that we are able to enjoy together, in the sunlit shine of a lucky Commencement day such as this one.

¹ Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 28–31.

A Continuing Conversation

Dedication of the Barker Center

September 12, 1997

WE ARE HERE to toast the transformation of the original Harvard Union – Major Higginson’s vision of a college association housed in a handsome building – into a new union: a bright center for the humanities, bearing the names of Robert and Elizabeth Barker. From the beginning, one of our main purposes has been to make certain that the original conception – the notion of a gathering place for individuals and groups – would not be lost but could actually be renewed and strengthened; that faculty and students, as well as departments and programs and humanistic fields of knowledge, would be brought together in a way that would make the daily exchange of ideas and views natural and easy; and that these conversations would inevitably yield insights that can help us understand human beings, human cultures, and human nature more clearly and more comprehensively.

We have no very convenient, concise definition of “the humanities.” Part of what we mean is captured in the Latin phrase *literae humaniores*, “humane letters”: those books and texts, especially the ancient classical texts in literature, history, and philoso-

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phy that have not only taught us so much about the world and ourselves, but are also great works of art in their uses of language, in their energy and suppleness as well as in their largeness of vision. We feel this immediately if we break in, for example, on one of Plato's dialogues, at almost any point:

Socrates: Is not rhetoric, taken generally, a universal art of enchanting the mind by arguments; which is practised not only in courts and public assemblies, but in private houses also, having to do with matters great as well as small?... And ... what are plaintiff and defendant doing in a law-court – are they not contending [against one another]?

Phædrus: Exactly so.

Soc. About the just and unjust – that is the matter in dispute?

Phædr. Yes.

Soc. And a professor of the art [of rhetoric] will make the same thing appear to the same persons to be at one time just, at another time, if he is so inclined, to be unjust?

Phædr. Exactly.

Soc. And when he speaks in the assembly he will make the same things seem good to the city at one time and at another time, the reverse of good?

Phædr. That is true.¹

We have essentially all the crucial elements of the humanities here: an intriguing two-person drama; an interesting unfolding philosophical argument; a purposeful but playful questioner (in this case Socrates himself) who is both serious and witty; a convenient agreeable companion (surely the original model for all succeeding generations of “yes-men”); an artful passage that uses persuasive rhetoric to convince us that artful speech and persua-

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sive rhetoric are likely to be deceptive – they are forms of enchantment, capable of misleading juries, political assemblies, and plain ordinary people into believing that the very same things which seem true one day can be made to appear completely false on the following day.

In the space of a few paragraphs, the law, politics, rhetoric, argumentation, and all their practitioners – essentially all human beings, speakers and listeners alike – come intriguingly close to being viewed as rather suspect: when they are not willfully misrepresenting things and deceiving others, they are themselves in the process of being misled. In fact, both processes occur simultaneously, almost all the time, since a very large part of life is spent talking and listening, writing and responding, trying to persuade and being persuaded. Meanwhile, Socrates alone seems to stand somewhere outside this fiendish little circle of reciprocal enchantment that binds and blinds everyone else. Although (as we discover a little later in the dialogue) Socrates (or Plato) does provide a possible way out for us, it is a way that is itself, of course, also open to further questioning and reply, debate and re-debate.

There are no clear morals to be drawn from this lively text, or from most other great humanistic texts. Once the process of serious inquiry into matters such as the nature of truth, of rhetoric, of justice, and of politics has begun – once we allow and in fact encourage debate on these and other subjects – there is no obvious point where the discussion can be stopped. And there is no way to be certain about the directions and turns it will take, especially as more and more people (with a growing number of views) begin to participate.

Out of all this talk, what William James used to call “gossiping about the universe,” out of this conversation in philosophy, the arts, history, and social or cultural studies emerge just those ideas that enable us – every now and then – to make slightly better sense of some part of human experience. At the same time, the whole enterprise is also a risky one. It can bewilder and per-

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plex. It raises questions and challenges on every side and provides few if any definitive answers. It can wander and go astray. And its practitioners sometimes press forward so strenuously that they can come to be viewed not simply as inquisitive, brilliant, eccentric, interesting, or annoying; they can also be seen as disturbing, threatening, or even potentially dangerous.

After all, Socrates himself was sentenced to death at a time of political crisis in Greece – having been charged with misleading and subverting the minds of Athenian youth. Almost 2,500 years later, in a relatively minor and amusing but still revealing incident, the British Board of Film censors decided to ban Jean Cocteau's strange yet beautiful surrealist film, *The Seashell and the Clergyman*. The year was 1929, and the board explained its decision by stating that “this film is so cryptic as to be almost meaningless. If there is a meaning, it is doubtless objectionable.”

Socrates and surrealist films are worlds (and even millennia) apart from one another. But they are, in their different ways, interesting cases, because the charges in each situation had to do with how we explore and create and present meanings – whether through philosophical inquiry, formal rhetoric, everyday conversation, or the cinema and other kinds of fiction or art. The charges also concerned (to a greater or lesser extent) whether the meanings being created were false and improper, and therefore disruptive of important moral and civic values; or whether it was possible to judge the meanings at all – and by what standards, and from whose point of view, especially if the presentation was so complicated or obscure that it was seen to be “almost meaningless,” whatever the phrase “almost meaningless” might possibly mean.

+ + +

“We couldn't get along in life,” states Thomas Nagel in an introductory volume about the nature of philosophy,

without taking the ideas of time, ... knowledge, language, right and wrong for granted most of the time; but in philosophy we investi-

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gate those things themselves. The aim is to push our understanding of the world and ourselves a bit deeper. Obviously, it isn't easy. The more basic the ideas you are trying to investigate, the fewer tools you have to work with. There isn't much you can assume or take for granted. So philosophy is a somewhat dizzying activity, and few of its results go unchallenged for long.²

If philosophy is a “somewhat dizzying” and complicated activity, we know that many other fields in the humanities and arts have also become more complicated – more philosophical and dizzying, so to speak – during the past three to four decades. Common assumptions and first premises have been reexamined at a deep level – in (for example) history, anthropology, art history, linguistics, literary studies, and the actual practice of the creative arts.

National public debates have often taken center stage and have been characterized, in cartoonlike fashion, as “culture wars”: battles concerning which texts should be part of the curricular Canon, or which aspects of Western civilization (or other civilizations) should be studied, and how. These issues, in themselves, are not new, but the much greater scope and intensity of recent disputes are what have made our own era seem different from many earlier times.

One of Jane Austen's heroines declared, nearly two centuries ago: “But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. . . . The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilence, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all.”³ Lately – and beneficially – “real solemn history” (along with other fields in the humanities) has obviously widened its lens and focused more systematically not only on “popes and kings” (or prime ministers, presidents, and conquistadors) but also on the ordinary lives of ordinary people and their *mentalités*; on neglected ideas and ideologies; on the lives and roles of women in different societies; on new forms of economic and social analysis; on the experience and culture of African Americans, Native Americans, and other peoples in many parts of the globe.

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Meanwhile, historians and others have also asked themselves – perhaps more incessantly than before – what is the evidence for this or that claim? In fact, what *constitutes* evidence, and what are we overlooking or leaving out – without even knowing it? Is the latest historical magnum opus simply one individual’s version or “construction” of what he or she prefers to think might possibly have happened – among all the countless other things that must also have been happening – in what we choose to call “the past”? Or does the opus seem to be in touch with what might be “reality” – something actual that is genuinely “out there”? How do we know? Who decides?

Far be it from me to try to answer such questions. But let me at least offer some of my own tentative thoughts about where we have recently come from in the humanities, and what may be possible in the future.

First, I do take it as a given that the humanities will always be destined to exist in a state approximating perpetual flux. Of course, there will be oscillations: times when there is more of a rough consensus (but certainly never a complete one) about many fundamental matters in a particular society, and other times when there is a great deal of sharp disagreement. But as long as the humanities remain committed to an open, continuing conversation and inquiry into human values and human affairs – involving countless participants – they will remain essentially, by definition, dynamic and subject to surprise as well as to change.

If we have any doubts on this score, and want a useful reference point outside (but not so very distant from) our own historical period, we simply have to remember the great chasms that opened – and the powerful shaking of the foundations that occurred – in nearly all fields of learning, including (prominently) the humanities, throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Any number of examples will come quickly to all our minds: the revolutionary effects produced by Darwin and the concept of

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evolution; the great transformations and schisms in religion that preceded (as well as succeeded) Darwin's work; the introduction and full establishment in universities of "modern" humanistic studies, from the 1880s through the turn of the century. These studies included English literature, art history, and the "modern" languages and literatures (among them French, German, Italian, and Slavic), as well as the development and legitimatization of the social sciences as academic disciplines. And this entire sea change led, of course, to the idea, born at Harvard, of a curriculum based largely on an "elective system," allowing students to choose from a rapidly growing number of courses taught by an increasing number of faculty, from a variety of points of view, incorporating a wider and wider range of texts and other materials.

The elective system shattered the previously existing order of prescribed courses and canonical classical texts to make room for a vaster and more complicated multiverse of knowledge. And the resulting cascade of new subjects and specialties produced a feeling on many sides that the world was no longer quite so coherent and comprehensible a place. Toward the end of his masterpiece, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Adams found that he could look to the future with little more than deep uncertainty and perplexity:

The child born in 1900 would, then, be born into a new world which would not be a unity but a multiple. Adams tried to imagine it, and an education that would fit it. He found himself in a land where no one had ever penetrated before....⁴

If Adams, writing around 1900, could not imagine an education that could "fit" his increasingly complicated world, we should not be surprised if – after an additional century of unprecedented growth in complexity – we too are experiencing some real turbulence, and are not always entirely certain about how to prepare or "fit" the child born not in 1900, but in the year 2000.

My second point about the humanities is a simple one: many

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of the discussions and debates of the past few decades – even at their most disputatious – have significantly broadened and deepened our ideas about human nature and experience in extraordinary ways. We know much more about the human past – and present; about the values, the ways of life, and the art of people in a far greater number of societies; and about individuals and groups whose very existence, and whose contributions, were often overlooked and certainly underestimated.

Such a great shift in knowledge and interpretive capacity – such a change in our collective sensibility and our potential for greater understanding – represents a major achievement and simply could not have been realized without real struggle, debate, and disagreement. “One of the greatest pains to human nature,” Walter Bagehot once remarked, “is the pain of a new idea.” If we have experienced a reasonable amount of pain recently, we have also enjoyed the harvest of many new insights and important new ideas.

Next, while I am certain that our current debates will continue, I also have the impression that the tenor and substance of many conversations in the humanities and related social sciences are beginning to change. The best work of the past twenty to thirty years is already well established. We have now reached a point where we can make much better judgments about the value of what has been achieved to date. We can also assess – far more clearly – which ideas or methods or approaches may have been unnecessarily displaced in these last few decades and should therefore be restored. We can begin to consider which courses, curricula, and research might prove to be most fruitful in the *next* few decades.

To have a place or “home,” therefore, where precisely these conversations can be pursued – at just this moment – is nothing less than a stroke of the greatest possible good fortune. In this sense, the creation and opening of the Barker Center for the humanities could not be more timely or propitious.

The Center will bring together under one large roof, in a won-

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derful space, many of the most recently established programs and departments in the humanities, the somewhat less recent programs, and the elder programs. It will be a kind of forum for students as well as faculty. It represents a significant and imaginative development for Harvard itself, but it is also – so far as I know – unique among major universities in its scope and breadth and inclusiveness. In short, the moment is ripe; the participants are engaged; and the new Center provides us with an unparalleled opportunity to venture forth confidently and creatively.

In closing, I want to read and say a few words about a modest poetic text. It is one of Keats' less-known sonnets, written after he had spent an evening at the home of the poet Leigh Hunt. The conversation had touched on *Lycidas*, Milton's elegy on the death of a young friend, as well as on Petrarch's sonnets to Laura: sonnets born of pain as well as love – and where Laura is inevitably associated in Keats' mind with his own poetic aspirations and with the laurel itself (the fresh green wreath awarded to "laureates"). As the poem begins, Keats has just ventured out into the cold and darkness of a November night:

*Keen, fitful gusts are whisp'ring here and there
Among the bushes half leafless, and dry;
The stars look very cold about the sky,
And I have many miles on foot to fare.
Yet feel I little of the cool bleak air,
Or of the dead leaves rustling drearily,
Or of those silver lamps that burn on high,
Or of the distance from home's pleasant lair:
For I am brimfull of the friendliness
That in a little cottage I have found;
Of fair-hair'd Milton's eloquent distress,
And all his love for gentle Lycid drown'd;
Of lovely Laura in her light green dress,
And faithful Petrarch gloriously crown'd.⁵*

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The sonnet is, of course, about many things. It helps to bring the humanities and arts back to a human and personal scale, where friendships and discussion, personal ambition and aspiration, suffering and loss, poetry and imagination all matter.

The sonnet also keeps beautifully in balance the uncertainties, risks, and even dangers of any important humane venture – whether in art, in inquiry and knowledge, or in life: it keeps these difficulties in balance with the possible satisfactions and rich rewards of great achievement.

Nearly everywhere in the poem – in nearly every line or image and inflection – we can find the energies stimulated by companionship, eloquence, love, faithfulness, and conversation. And there are also the remembered pain and distress of early death (as in *Lycidas*), or the pervasive sense of winter's approach and its quickening dark encroachment – with its cold, its rustling dead leaves, and all its inevitable intimations of mortality.

The sonnet creates a microdrama – the humanities and arts in miniature – full of apprehension but also of hope and momentary good cheer. And at the heart of the poem, of course, is a celebration of the restorative power of a dwelling place: of a home where the gathering of people stimulates good talk and aspiration; where ideas – however different from one another – can be humanized, enriched, and perhaps occasionally even reconciled.

Of course, no large center for the humanities can expect to be the small Hampstead cottage of Keats' sonnet. But the Barker Center will, in its own way, enable us to begin new, fruitful, and timely conversations, so that there may well be many more times when each of us, like Keats, may feel

*... little of the cool bleak air,
Or of the dead leaves, rustling drearily,
Or of those silver lamps that burn on high,
Or of the distance from home's pleasant lair:
For I am brimfull of the friendliness*

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*That in a little cottage I have found;
Of fair-hair'd Milton's eloquent distress,
And all his love for gentle Lycid drown'd;
Of lovely Laura in her light green dress,
And faithful Petrarch gloriously crown'd.*

Meanwhile, let us dedicate and celebrate the Barker Center, “gloriously crown’d.”

1 Plato, *Phædrus* 261a–261d, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 3rd. ed., trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1892), 1: 468–469.

2 Thomas Nagel, *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 5.

3 Catherine Moreland in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817).

4 Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 457.

5 John Keats, “Keen, fitful gusts are whisp’ring here and there,” *Poems* (London: C. & J. Ollier, 1817), 87.

