

## *A Continuing Conversation*

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*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.<sup>1</sup>*

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.

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“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.<sup>2</sup>*

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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....<sup>4</sup>*

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.<sup>5</sup>*

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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.

