

Culture Matters

Roger Scruton.

It is with great pleasure and gratitude that I deliver this talk, in response to the award of the Richard Weaver-Ingersoll Prize. I wish to thank the trustees of the prize for their recognition, Belmont Abbey and Bob Preston for their hospitality, and all the friends who helped to make this recognition possible,. In this talk I want to say a little about why and how the teaching of the humanities has recently been subjected to such radical changes, and what we - representatives of a civilisation that is now entering its second Dark Age - must do in response.

The nations of Europe and its diaspora emerged from the Second World War badly shaken, impoverished, and in many cases burdened by socialist government. Many of the European countries had lost everything in the conflict, apart from their national and cultural identity - and in the case of Germany, as Gunther Grass has poignantly shown, those assets too. The Americans found themselves with the task of restoring order and prosperity in the Old World, and were at the same time confronted with the greatest threat to their interests and even their survival, in the shape of the Soviet Union. The social, economic and political situation of the Western world had seldom looked so bleak.

There was one source of hope, however, which was the shared cultural inheritance of Europe. All the nations, whether defeated or victorious, could look for sustenance in the cultural bequest of a continent shaped over two millenia by Christianity and Roman Law. It took an effort of will to believe, but believe they did, that Nazism, fascism and communism were perversions of Western civilisation, that it was possible to return from these local forms of insanity to the inheritance that they betrayed, and that education should henceforth have the recovery of that inheritance as its goal.

Of course that belief was not overtly expressed, nor was it made into a policy. But it was firmly embedded in the minds of those who taught in schools and universities, and it helped to shape the curriculum as I knew it in my youth. It was assumed throughout the European and American academy that the curriculum in the humanities should be focused on the Western cultural inheritance, that schools should pay due respect to Christian worship, and that lessons in history and geography should reinforce the national loyalties of the pupils.

Of course, that assumption still left much to be determined. For one thing, the Western cultural inheritance is multifarious, and riven by the conflicting demands of Christian piety and Enlightenment scepticism. But the conflict between Christianity and Enlightenment served rather to strengthen the curriculum than to weaken it, injecting a shared method and common goal into the humanities at every level of study. Literary criticism, philosophy, foreign and classical languages, music, art and historiography, all could be approached through the dialectic of reason and faith. Western culture came across as a prolonged interrogation of the Christian religion, an attempt to understand, express, criticize and evaluate the Christian beliefs and imagery, and to portray the world through eyes that had been both blinkered by faith and dazzled by science but which, thanks to the high culture of our civilisation, had achieved a synthesis and a clarity that was uniquely able to transcend those partial points of view.

People of my generation were brought up in the shadow of this cultural consensus. Some of us leaned towards the Christian faith, others towards Enlightenment scepticism. Some of us saw culture as peripheral to the intellectual life, and science as central, while others were of the opposite persuasion. Some of us were romantics or Georgians in our taste; others were ardent modernists. All of us were persuaded that culture matters, that it should be taught in schools and universities, and taught not just as a curiosity but as a tradition and a form of life. This attachment to Western culture did not mean that either we or our teachers were parochial. On the contrary, the writers who exerted the greatest influence on us were Joyce, Eliot and Pound, the first two steeped in the works of Dante, Baudelaire and Flaubert, the third already inhabiting the world of Confucianism, Noh plays and the shattered pieties of the East.

For us, therefore, Western culture was marked by the universalism of the Enlightenment, and our heroes were building bridges across the world. Pound in the *Book of Odes* and Mahler in *Das Lied von der Erde* linked us to the Confucian culture of China; Britten opened our ears to the music of Bali and the theatre of Japan; Eliot made Dante, Baudelaire and Cavalcanti part of our own poetic tradition; Van Gogh brought us the Japanese print and Lawrence the plumed serpent of ancient Mexico. Wagner, Ruskin and Henry Adams had redeemed the medieval world, just as Goethe, in the *West-östlicher Divan*, had opened the way to Hafiz and Rumi. It seemed to us as though culture were one single tapestry of meaning, centred on Europe and the Christian heritage, but pinned to every corner of the globe.

Nor did we doubt that a discipline was available, which would permit us both to absorb the works of our culture and also to discriminate between

them. This discipline was criticism, and it was brought intensely home to us by our teachers that criticism is necessary if the culture is to be protected from decay. We absorbed this lesson too from T.S. Eliot, whose *Sacred Wood* was a seminal book during my teenage years, from F.R. Leavis, whose journal *Scrutiny* set the tone for academic English both in universities and in schools, from Pound too, whose *ABC of Reading* conveyed with exemplary clarity the message that a book is a person and must be judged accordingly. Nor were we cut off from the influence of the new critics here in America. Cleanth Brooks and R.P. Blackmur both impressed us with their objective vision of literature, while the prefaces of Henry James were and (for me at least, remain) an authoritative proof that the novel is the Western art-form *par excellence*.

The prevailing sense among students of the humanities was that, if you want to know the meaning of life - of your own life as well as of the lives around you - you should explore your cultural inheritance with a critical eye, so as to repossess the meaning has been distilled in it. The temptation was not other cultures, whatever they might be, but corruption within the culture that is ours - in particular the ubiquitous diseases of sentimentality and kitsch. Our aesthetic ideal was typified by the late quartets of Beethoven and by the poem that Eliot named after them: *Four Quartets*. These were works imbued through and through with a religious melancholy, and which also achieved a purity of utterance that set them apart from all the ordinary pleasures of high art. And although our suspicion of kitsch came to us primarily from that arch-conservative T.S. Eliot, we found it endorsed by the quasi-socialist F.R. Leavis, by the liberal Thomas Mann and by the Marxists Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. The effort to 'purify the dialect of the tribe' was one that could, and did, unite people of all political persuasions, and the study of culture was something higher and more meaningful than the adoption of any political creed. Culture, we believed, is a form of knowledge, while politics is mere opinion.

I don't doubt that many of you in this room acquired their first respect for the life of the mind in a similar way. And I am sure that the effect was, for you, what it was also for me: a sense of belonging, of homecoming from the alien land of adolescence to a spiritual region in which meaning was everywhere immediate and apparent. This region was what we meant by culture, and culture rose around us and above us like a great cathedral, defining a place of judgement, discrimination and allusion, a place where everything connected and where everything was imbued with a significance that made its study worthwhile. It still seems to me that the best form of

education in the humanities would be one in which students enter that cathedral, and enter it as we did, with a critical as well as a wondering eye.

But it is no accident that the image of a cathedral presents itself to me. This culture into which we were inducted was not just a by-product of Christianity. Although it rejoiced in its universal vision, its central manifestations derived from the Christian faith. Even the pagan writings of D.H. Lawrence depend for their penetration on a language rooted in the *Book of Common Prayer* and in the imagery of the Psalms and the Gospels. *Four Quartets* owed its immense power over people of my generation to its ability to summon the ghost of a Christian belief that had all but died in us, but which was seeking to breathe again.

We were, I think, aware of this intimate dependence of our culture on the Christian faith, and were also convinced that nevertheless our culture could be studied, enjoyed and internalised by unbelievers - could become, for them as much as for the committed Christian, a source of meaning, truth and value. Moreover it never seemed to us that our critical studies were merely subjective, that our tastes were arbitrary or ideologically motivated, still less that - in pursuing them - we were falling victim to some hidden political agenda. The methods of interpretation and evaluation that we applied, when assessing the sincerity, depth, finesse or emotional truth of a particular poem or painting, seemed to us to deliver clear and absolute answers - or at any rate answers as clear and as nearly absolute as the subject allowed. Indeed, we did not fully endorse the suggestion that there was some 'method' that we applied in order to establish the superiority of Mozart over Vivaldi, of Milton over Carew, or of Titian over Veronese. For that would have implied that someone else could choose some other 'method' and arrive at some other result. It would have implied that the method was something added, chosen by us, in order to decipher a cultural artefact that was otherwise mysterious. The works of our culture were not mysterious to us, but merely deep, in the way that the face of a mother is deep to the eyes of her child.

I do not need to remind you of the changes that have cast that vision of culture in doubt - or rather cast it out completely from the academic study of literature, art, music and history. Take a look at the average Department of English or Modern Languages in America, at the publications of university presses in the humanities, at the learned journals and conference programs, and you will be presented with quite another vision of culture from the one that my contemporaries acquired. Western culture will still be an important theme; but it will be approached as something alien, culpable, oppressive, something to be held at a distance or, if approached, subjected to

acts of sustained aggression. The teacher in a humanities department will not, as a rule, be imparting Western culture to the students but inoculating them against it. He or she will be assuming a standpoint outside that culture, adopting ‘methods’ that allegedly distance him from the texts and works of art that he studies, and which purge him of any commitment to their vision.

On the surface these methods are highly disparate and not obviously compatible. To venture the briefest of summaries: there is the neo-Marxist approach of Fredric Jameson; the structuralism of Roland Barthes; the post-structuralist theory associated with Michel Foucault; there is feminist criticism, either in its staid American version typified by Judith Butler or in the flamboyant and anarchic vision of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva (who also adds a Marxist and a structuralist flavour). There is the ‘Deconstruction’ of Jacques Derrida, the postmodernism of Jean-François Lyotard, the New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt, the post-colonialism of Edward Said, the New Pragmatism of Richard Rorty and the spectacular advances made by Queer Theory and lesbian discourse analysis.¹

However, the appearance of variety is deceptive. What these ‘methods’ have in common is far more important than what distinguishes them, since it is the thing that explains why they exist. They are united in their oppositional stance to Western culture and to the civilisation from which that culture has grown. And they share a predilection for intellectual gobbledygook. Moreover there is a deep connection between the gobbledygook and the political agenda. The gobbledygook is a kind of alchemy, which clothes the agenda in a veil of expertise, while also rendering it immune to rational criticism. I won’t burden you with examples, and in any case you all know the style. But here, nevertheless, is an illustrative sentence from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:

The remembrance of the ‘present’ as space is the possibility of the utopian imperative of no-(particular)-place, the metropolitan project that can supplement the post-colonial attempt at the impossible cathexis of place-bound history as the lost time of the spectator.²

There are a lot more empty sentences where that one came from and now that Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont have compiled their *sottisier* (*Intellectual*

¹ The best introduction to the world of literary theory is Frederick Crews, *Postmodern Pooh*, London 2002, a book which treats the subject with the seriousness that it deserves.

² (‘Psychoanalysis in Left Field and Fieldworking: Examples to Fit the Title’, in *Speculations after Freud: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Sonu Shamdasani and Michael Münchow, London and NY, Routledge, 1994, p. 63.)

Impostures), it is no longer scandalous to laugh at them. What the reader is immediately aware of, however, is that, whatever the sentence is about, it is no laughing matter. The style is one of po-faced, or pomo-faced, seriousness, not without a certain air of menace. The ability of writers like Sokal to laugh at such utterances is matched by the total inability of their authors to laugh at anything. Literary 'theory' is a joke-free zone, and never more humourless than when pretending, as Jacques Derrida sometimes pretends, that it is all a joke. For laughter, like irony, is a kind of acceptance. In the normal run of things to laugh is to forgive, since what we see as absurd no longer threatens us. Literary theory, however, is not prepared to forgive its target for anything whatsoever.

For the advocates of literary theory Western culture is an oppressive burden that must be cast off. For this reason their meaningless sentences contain clues to a meaning that is seldom overtly stated, but left as it were to shine through the greyness of the prose like a fire burning beyond it. In the sentence that I quoted you will recognize some of these clues: the reference to a utopian imperative, a metropolitan project, which is part of a post-colonial attempt. Words like 'imperative', 'project' and 'attempt' all indicate a call to action. Invented words ('rememoration'), out-of-place technicalities ('cathexis', echoing Strachey's mistranslation of Freud), unexplained quotation marks ('present') and parentheses ('no-(particular)-place'), and references to abstractions such as space and time, serve to neutralize the normal process of meaning. Only through the clues - words like 'utopia' and 'post-colonial' - can you arrive at the gist. And the gist is opposition. This writer is setting herself and her readers against the 'colonial' world, favouring a new utopia that will rearrange the social and cultural landscape of modern society and also deprive the old culture of its grip.

In their satirical exposé, Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont show the extent to which gobbledygook of the kind that I have quoted has displaced thought from the humanities curriculum. And they go on to suggest that this gobbledygook does a disservice to the broadly left-wing and progressive causes with which it is associated. To emphasize their point they refer to their own left-wing beliefs, and to their conviction that clarity, objectivity and genuine science are the real weapons to be used in the fight for social justice. This sentiment is echoed by Barbara Epstein, who both deplores the association of postmodern theorising with the left and applauds the emergence of humanities departments and faculties which are overtly committed to left-wing and progressive causes.³ She sees postmodern theory

³ ('Postmodernism and the Left', *New Politics*, Winter 1997.)

as a profoundly retrogressive development, which prevents the academic left from seizing the intellectual high ground in the battle of ideas.

I profoundly disagree with Sokal, Bricmont and Epstein. Gobbledygook is far more effective in propagating left-wing and progressive opinions than reasoned argument, for the simple reason that progressive opinions, once explicitly stated, expose themselves to the threat of refutation, something that they do not always survive. The purpose of the jargon is not to find novel reasons for the posture of cultural opposition, but to render that posture impregnable, by putting it beyond rational debate. The many ‘methods’ that I mentioned have one thing in common, which is that they do not argue for their political posture but assume it, and at the same time conceal that assumption deep within a protective carapace of nonsense. In this respect they are theological, rather than scientific, theories: theories designed not to establish some belief but to protect that belief from assault.

It is interesting to observe, in this respect, that the language of ‘theory’ drives out competitors, so as to become a kind of gangland code. Gresham’s law, which tells us that bad money drives out good, has a simple explanation, namely that people, knowing the worth of good money, hoard it, and circulate the counterfeit money in its stead. This law ought not to operate in the intellectual world. Good theories ought to drive out bad, since good theories are those that survive refutation, and sense ought to drive out nonsense, since nonsense has nothing to say. In the humanities, however, a kind of Gresham’s law seems to hold: bad theories drive out good, and nonsense drives out sense. Various explanations have been offered for this⁴, some more plausible than others. The important point is that the survival of a literary theory depends not on its remaining unrefuted, but on its ability to make refutation undesirable, impossible, or both. Refutation is undesirable when the theory is so bound up with some approved political posture as to be almost indistinguishable from it, and impossible when the theory is surrounded by an impenetrable wall of nonsense. Hence new literary theories come quickly to dominate academic discourse, and the reader is deprived of the currency in which to offer his dissent. There is no way of formulating, in the jargon of Queer Theory, Discourse Theory, Deconstruction, New Historicism, etc. the elementary beliefs about the human condition which form the bedrock of traditional cultures: beliefs about the deep differences and affinities between men and women, about the naturalness of the family, about the religious need and transcendental longing of our species.

⁴ See, for example, R.A.D. Grant, ‘On Deconstruction’ in *Imagining the Real*, London 2004; Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Modern Culture*, South Bend Indiana, 2000, chs 11 and 12.

But this brings me to another feature of the new methods in the humanities, which is the shared, though often covert, adoption of a perspectival viewpoint. Nietzsche's celebrated announcement that there are no truths, only interpretations, is reaffirmed in a thousand different ways by the new forms of scholarship, and although Nietzsche's utterance is blatantly paradoxical, since it can be true only if it isn't, the paradox is once again concealed within the postmodern jargon. This perspectivalism appears in many forms, and is often dressed up as something highly original. For example there is Foucault's theory that truths are never simply truths but rather part of the *episteme* of an epoch, the *episteme* belonging to the ruling 'discourse'. Opposition between doctrines is merely a contest of the powers that require them: the important thing in any intellectual dispute, therefore, is to be on the side of the liberator against the oppressor. Likewise there is the notion, common to American feminists like Judith Butler, that 'gender' and 'sexuality' are social constructs, which can be differently constructed for different purposes and with different political goals. There is no objective fact of the matter about sex or gender, simply competing political projects, each attempting to construct the sexes in its own favoured way.

Again the notorious argument of Luce Irigaray that $E = mc^2$ is a 'sexed equation' which 'privileges the speed of light over other speeds that are vitally necessary to us', and which therefore belongs to the 'masculine physics' that 'privileges' rigid over fluid entities, conveys the same perspectival assumption.⁵ There is no objective truth in the matter: merely contrasting perspectives, one masculine, another feminine, in competition for the capture of political space. If we ask ourselves why Richard Rorty has become every humanities department's favourite philosopher it must surely be because he is the only philosopher still around who takes this perspectivalism seriously. Rorty's pragmatism, put forward on the back of what to my mind are highly unpersuasive arguments, seems to imply that the contest between competing views is always in the end a contest of power, that there is no truth independent of the interests of those struggling to capture it, and that if feminists are empowered by the belief that women are in every respect the equals of men then they are entitled to that belief, as much as to the belief that $2+2 = 4$ - or maybe to the even more empowering belief that $2+2 = 5$.

I suspect that this perspectivalism appeals to students far more than any of the gibberish that features in the theories used to advance it. For it corresponds to, and helps to make sense of, their own deep disorientation, as

⁵ 'Sujet de la science, sujet sexué?', in *Sens et place des connaissances dans la société: 3ème confrontation*, Paris, CNRS 1987, p. 110.

they enter university with all their old certainties in disarray, and find themselves confronted on every side by a determined assault on the values and beliefs that their parents had wished to implant in them. It is a natural response - especially here in America - for young people to retreat from conviction when conviction gives offence. A posture of total relativism recommends itself, since it leaves every belief, and every value, free-floating and foundationless. In these circumstances we can all agree, since we are agreeing about nothing. Rival worldviews are merely rival flavours imparted to the same diet of platitudes.

However, I don't think that the exponents of the new literary theories see the matter in that way. Their perspectivalism goes with a vehement (and strictly inconsistent) antagonism to Western culture, which for them has been a dungeon, not a cathedral. In the great works of our tradition they have sniffed out the poisonous residues of patriarchy, sexism, racism, orientalism, class oppression, homophobia etc. Their studies consist in unmasking these faults, and showing them to be so glaring that the tradition loses its claim to authority. Their concepts are adopted precisely for their unmasking potential, and their archetype is the theory of ideology, as Marx and Engels first expounded it - the theory which analyses every gesture and every utterance in terms of what it conceals, rather than what it says.

Once the matter is put in such a way, moreover, the battle is out in the open. I might argue that the old curriculum enshrines the wisdom and achievements of our culture, that in teaching it we unite students to the only inheritance that they could ever really acquire, and that by teaching it critically we also encourage them to reflect in an objective way on the human condition. This mode of study is genuine, impartial and educational. And I might go further, suggesting that the old curriculum was apolitical, in just the way that science is or ought to be apolitical, Luce Irigaray notwithstanding. A student could emerge from studying that curriculum as a conservative, a socialist or a liberal and still show the knowledge that the curriculum is designed to impart. The new humanities, by contrast, are transparently political, built around an agenda rather than a set of intellectual questions, and designed to indoctrinate, to recruit and to close the mind. A course in Women's Studies, for example, will be about as impartial as a course in Islamic Studies at Al-Azhar, and a person who rejected the feminist assumptions would be as likely to graduate with distinction as an Orthodox Jew from the University of Tehran.

For those who have swallowed the perspectival assumption, however, this robust response to the new curriculum is ineffective. The old curriculum, they will say, is designed to induce adherence to the underlying

assumptions of Western culture, assumptions that it does not put in question since they are the unspoken premises of its worldview. The claims to impartiality, objectivity and educational standards are just as much part of the mask as the curriculum itself. It may be that conservatives, liberals and socialists can all imbibe this 'impartial' knowledge; but they do so by closing their minds to the real alternatives to Western culture. Their separate political postures are simply adjoining enclaves within a common territory, and the effect of their education is to prevent them from thinking outside that territory or questioning the scheme of values that prevails within it. Which is to say that the old curriculum is just as political, in its way, as the new one, and additionally pernicious on account of the pretence that it is no such thing.

Sometimes that argument is put provocatively by asserting that the 'impartiality' of the old curriculum is simply 'Western impartiality' - in other words, impartiality towards the world seen under Western eyes, impartiality towards a world already 'inscribed' with the Western perspective, the perspective that we, the newcomers, are putting in question. (That would be the approach of Edward Said or Julia Kristeva.) Put in this way, however, the argument is open to an obvious rejoinder, namely: how do you know that you have freed yourself from that same perspective? And if you have, on what grounds do you assume that your perspective promises hope to your students, an improved cultural atmosphere, a way of seeing things more adapted to the emerging postmodern condition?

That rejoinder has a point. For after all, if you look closely at the ideological assumptions of the new curriculum - feminism, gay rights, sexual liberation, multiculturalism, and so on - you will naturally ask yourself where, outside the Western world, these causes have been able to establish themselves or form part of an enduring culture? Edward Said, for example, whose claims to represent the Middle East were claims of birth, but not of culture (after all, he didn't even read in the Arabic language), would be hard pressed to argue that the advocate of feminism, gay rights and the new sexual agenda would survive for long in Egypt, or anywhere else outside a Western city.

On the other hand, that rejoinder is merely *ad hominem*, and does nothing to overthrow the central claim of the new curriculum, which is that choice of curriculum in the humanities is always and inevitably a political act, and to be defended and criticised on political grounds. To pretend that there is some impartial and uncommitted peak from which the landscape of cultural conflict can be surveyed and assessed is to assume precisely what

needs to be proved, namely that our inherited style of criticism has some greater intellectual claim on us than the many alternatives.

In the light of that I do not see any way to uphold the old curriculum which does not also involve a defence of the culture that speaks through it. And how do you defend a culture? This is the question that I shall address in what remains of this talk.

The term 'culture' is used in two important ways. In the writings of sociologists and anthropologists the term denotes the shared assumptions, goals and values that enable people to cooperate in the work of society, to devote themselves to the common task of social reproduction, and to take satisfaction in each other's good opinion. I call this 'common culture'. Common cultures differ between societies, between regions of the world, and between the various self-supporting enclaves within a given social organism. There is both Christian and Islamic culture, a division within the first between Catholic and Protestant, and within Protestantism between the culture of an established church and that of its non-conformist rivals. In this sense we all imbibe a culture, and (in our initial innocence at least) experience the world in terms of it.

Herder distinguished *Kultur* (the inheritance of a rooted people) from *Zivilisation* (their legal, educational and technological achievements). His intention was to exalt the first and distance himself from the second. He was followed in this by Spengler, who saw civilisation as the lifeless routine that remains, when true culture has died. Spengler was here extending the term 'civilisation', to include political institutions and the routines of life in a society of strangers. But both Spengler and Herder saw *Kultur* - the common culture of an organic community - as the precious thing that must be preserved, and whose loss will spell our doom.

The term 'culture' has also been used to denote the particular intellectual and spiritual assets made available by art, literature and music: assets that may not be available to everyone, and which are bound up with the extended sympathies and trained intelligence of those who make the effort to study them. Culture in this sense - high culture - has shaped the university curriculum in the humanities, and indeed, if my teachers were to be believed, was the final content of every legitimate topic of humane education.

Now it is fairly obvious that you don't teach common culture (Herder's *Kultur*) in a university. It comes to the child through the surrounding customs of a society, and its core component is - or at any rate has been - the faith, rituals, customs, words and festivals of a religion. Take religion away and the common culture tends to fragment, as individuals

cease to share their customs and to set up shop on their own. On the other hand new customs and ceremonies often come in place of the old, focused not on a shared faith but on a shared nationality, a shared regional identity, or some similar emblem of togetherness. 'Western culture' as it now is consists in these new, experimental and often self-chosen forms of togetherness, which bear the imprint of the Christian faith, but focus instead on nation, community, and the 'little platoons' of a free society. Institutions like marriage have survived the collapse of religion, but only to lose their sacramental aura; and the core of sexual morality is now transparently jeopardised. Nevertheless, a common culture of sorts has grown amid the ruins of religion, and shapes the aspirations of the child.

Common culture, in this sense, can be both justified and criticized. Enlightenment means distinguishing habits that stifle from habits that fulfil our potential, exploring the ways in which our culture promotes and frustrates our happiness, and the ways in which it aids or impedes the reproduction of a viable society. Enlightenment, so defined, is intrinsic to Western culture, which has grown and altered in the light of its own self-examination. That is one major distinction between our culture and the Islamic world, which has been remarkable, in recent times, for its inability to subject itself to criticism. After all *islam* means submission, not choice, and its confrontation with the modern world is not a search for compromise but a bafflement that can easily reshape itself as a life-and-death struggle. To say that is not, *pace* Said, to give way to an 'orientalist' prejudice. It is to offer a reflective assessment of a real human difference. If we are to vindicate Western culture, then we ought to offer just such reflective comparisons. And we ought to allow ourselves to explore the ways in which Islamic culture, in the days of Al-Farabi, Al-Ghazali and the *falsafah*, was able to adopt the critical attitude to its own credentials that is so lamentably absent from its current representatives, and the consequences that have followed since the fatal pronouncement that the gate of *ijtihad* is closed.

It seems to me that the Enlightenment is not, in fact, a latecomer to Christian civilisation. As I have argued in *The West and the Rest* the assumption of a shared secular order is present in the very first attempts by Jesus and St Paul to found a religion that would enjoy the protection of Imperial law. The culture of Christianity has always been, in a measure, self-critical, and many of the political freedoms that we now take for granted have their origin in customs deeply rooted in the habit of Christian forgiveness. When young people come to university it is very likely that they will have acquired customs and values that derive from the centuries of enlightened reflection on the Christian faith. Many things will appear

controversial or downright absurd to them. But fundamental habits of free association, of respect for the individual, of love for family, team and neighbourhood, of everyday normality and law-abidingness will have been received and internalised. The old curriculum assumed little more than this, and what it offered was the intellectual, emotional and artistic training that would permit students to continue the habit of reflective membership and extend it towards the life of the mind.

Western art and literature shares the enquiring spirit of the common culture upon which it broods. It is not a vehicle for religious or political propaganda, and even when presenting a Christian cosmology, like Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, or a vision of Christian redemption, like Bach in the *St Matthew Passion*, it uses a *lingua franca* that assumes no specific religious belief. As Santayana once pointed out, the greatest poet in the English language, whose plays used to form the core curriculum in English studies, nowhere reveals the colour of his religious beliefs or even whether he has any. His works are reflections on the human condition which can be understood and enjoyed by anyone.

A curriculum centred on the high culture of Western civilisation will inculcate just the kind of self-critical distance that we associate with the Enlightenment. This does not mean that it cherishes the open mind or is hostile to religious commitment. It is a culture that aspires to universality, and to the widest possible understanding of and sympathy with the human condition. That is one reason why it has spread so easily around the globe. I am told that the highest proportion of Shakespeare productions per head of population is in Nigeria and Japan.

As a result of this self-critical tendency, Western culture has given rise to a university curriculum in the humanities which has side-lined theology. The medieval university placed theology on a pinnacle. Since God is the most important being in the universe, and since our destiny depends entirely on his will, the medievals believed, we must devote the best of ourselves to studying his nature and commandments. Yet even in the medieval university the curriculum was developing in a secular direction, with subjects like philosophy, philology and law taking on an autonomous movement of their own. The Renaissance university soon displaced theology from its central place in the curriculum in favour of *studia humaniorum*. The university ceased to be a school of Biblical hermeneutics and devoted itself instead to the hermeneutics of the human world. I think it can fairly be said of the humanities, as they were taught until recently in European and American universities, that their overarching goal was to acquaint the student with a self-critical culture, on the understanding that this culture, in

some unreflective form or other, was already his. The purpose was not merely to impart facts and theories, but also - and more importantly - to acquaint the student with the possibilities of feeling, when confronted with real human beings in real situations. And study would be guided by a belief in that distinction made so vivid by Jane Austen, between right feeling and wrong feeling, the first a kind of discipline, the second a perennial temptation.

In opposition to that, the new curriculum wishes us to subject our cultural inheritance to a work of 'deconstruction'. We are to dissect our culture on the operating table, so that the stink of racism, sexism, phallocracy and homophobia invades our nostrils. We do this using theories which hide their assumptions so effectively that they cannot be questioned. You see this at its most explicit in Women's Studies, a subject designed to protect and instil a particular view of the relation between the sexes. I don't say that the view is false, any more than I say that the premise of theology is false. But I do say that there is a great difference between a premise and a conclusion, that the first must be self-evident and the second argued for. When the contentious conclusion of a discipline is adopted as its unquestioned premise, then the discipline shifts from the humanities back towards theology.

The theological nature of the new curriculum can be seen in other features too. First, there is the attitude to the opponent. He is not to be confronted but excluded, as a person of rival faith. Those familiar with the hiring process in humanities faculties will know exactly what I am referring to. Each candidate must be ideologically vetted, and even if he has not explicitly said, for example, that gay liberation is a social disaster, his writings will be perused for the evidence that this is what he nevertheless thinks. Once accused of the crime the presumption of guilt remains in place, just as in trials for heresy.

This exclusion of the opponent can be witnessed also in the literature of the new curriculum. There is simply no place on the reading list for any text which challenges the orthodox view. Derrida's response to Sokal - which was to say 'le pauvre Sokal' and change the subject - is about as open-minded as the postmodern standpoint ever gets. Writers who have challenged the intellectual credibility and moral right of the postmodern gurus (Ellis, Tallis, Grant, Kimball, and many more) are not rebutted but ignored. The new curriculum is not offering debate but membership: like a religion, it is something you join.

Secondly there is the emergence of censorship, on a scale that we never witnessed in the world of scholarship as my generation first

encountered it. Certain views are not to be represented in the literature, and the attempt to represent them will be punished. These views include some fairly natural beliefs about the differences between men and women, about the consequences of sexual liberation, about the success of Anglo-Saxon civilisation, about racial and cultural conflicts in modern societies. Censorship proceeds by transferring the onus of proof. If you argue, for example, that homosexual desire is not the same kind of thing as heterosexual desire, then you immediately are landed with the burden of proof. It is not the one who denies this traditional opinion who must prove his point but you, the heretic. And the burden is made so heavy that you will never be able to discharge it. Only a final demonstration from self-evident premises will satisfy your critic. And your inability to produce that demonstration is proof of your intellectual incompetence. In other words, your unacceptable conclusions show your unfitness for an academic post.

This censorship extends also to the language of scholarship. Language policing is now routine in academic journals in America, and even if it involves the greatest violence to the syntax and style of the published texts, the police must be obeyed. Pronominal rectitude is next to godliness, and whole swathes of the language have been expunged from the dictionary on account of their racist, sexist, imperialist and homophobic associations. This assault on the language helps to put a barrier between the student and the authors whom he studies, since he cannot share their robust sense of entitlement to use the words that are there.

It will be replied that the intention is not to censor rival views or to dictate conclusions, but simply to be 'inclusive'. Politically incorrect language has been ruled out because of its tendency to exclude sexual, cultural or racial minorities; the onus of proof has been transferred only because exclusion must be justified, and so on. But those innocuous seeming claims should not blind us to the fact that the energy behind the new approach to the humanities is largely negative. This energy is directed against the traditional curriculum and the culture that speaks through it, far more than it is directed towards some real alternative. Indeed the alternatives are never seriously described. The idea of another order, another culture, another way of being is a pure noumenon, espoused only in order to shore up the negative judgement that is being passed on the given phenomenon - which is Western culture. In short, the purpose is not to include but to exclude, and the thing to be excluded is precisely that thing around which the curriculum has been hitherto constructed.

I have only given the barest outline of a defence of Western culture. But what I have said raises a deep and important question, which is why the

old curriculum should have fallen so widely into disrepute, why the new curriculum should have so many adherents, and - in particular - why the new curriculum should now define the status and outlook of established intellectuals.

If a culture were merely a collection of beliefs to be accepted, texts to be studied, works of art to be absorbed, then it would be hard to explain the animus of the new curriculum towards the old. Once we see culture for what it is, however, this animus becomes comprehensible. A common culture is a form of membership, and the high culture that has grown from it perpetuates the memory of that membership and exalts it into something natural, unchangeable and serene. When religious faith declines it becomes difficult for intellectuals to believe that they really belong to the same community as ordinary people. Their claims to priesthood have been exploded, and their isolation in academies sets them at an impassable distance from the ordinary church-going people whose idea of adventure is to go out and mow the lawn. Confronted with a class of adolescents, and aware of the impossibility of joining the culture from which they have emerged, the teacher enters that negative frame of mind which I call 'the culture of repudiation': he or she makes a bid for a new form of membership based in the systematic rejection of the old. I sometimes think that the emergence of this culture of repudiation is a normal result of the breakdown of an old religion. Faced everywhere by customs, artefacts and rituals that have been shorn of their old authority, the would-be priest is moved to acts of sacrilege and iconoclasm. And to do this before a class of young people who have yet to discard their inheritance is to enjoy the brief illusion that you really are engaged in teaching something - that the assembled negatives that drive your thinking amount to a positive alternative.

I am inclined to believe, however, that young people are not so foolish as to think that postmodern theorizing is a real education, or that the old cultural authorities are really as discredited as their teachers would like them to believe. The best of them will understand university as an opportunity to put TV, video and cellphones behind them, and to explore that strangest and most intriguing of cultural entities, the Book. It only needs one teacher to point them in this direction, and to open their eyes to what becomes immediately obvious, that a book may contain insights of universal significance and beauties of lasting appeal, and they will go out of their own accord in search of further illumination. And it is one testimony to the grandeur and universality of Western culture that this effect is felt by students everywhere - whether driven by communism into the catacombs of communist Prague, oppressed by postmodernism in the American university,

or terrorised by Islamist orthodoxy in modern Iran (see Azar Nafisi *Reading Lolita in Tehran*). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the official view should have arisen here, as it arose in eastern Europe, in Iran and in China, that people who introduce their students to the old way of reading, and the old culture that grew from it, ought to be shot.