

The Inaugural Lecture

by Professor David A. Myers

BA(Hons), MA(Adel), PhD(Syd)

Professor of Comparative Literature
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**"The Revolution in the Humanities:
a Eurocentric or an Asian Oriented
Curriculum?"**

Delivered Tuesday, 6 November 1990



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A REVOLUTION IN THE HUMANITIES

A EUROCENTRIC OR AN ASIAN-ORIENTED CURRICULUM?

Not so very long ago, in pre-World War I England, studying the Humanities at university was considered to be the mark of a gentleman and a scholar. The Humanities educated men (but not women) of good family to carry on class traditions and become the pillars of their society. It was considered desirable that colonial governors, diplomats and statesmen should have distinguished themselves through a study of such classical subjects as Latin, Greek, theology and philosophy.

I make this point only to give some historical perspective to our debate on the best Humanities curriculum for contemporary Australian universities. Ideologies and faiths change, the dominant classes change and intellectual fashions change. Trade relationships change. Immigration patterns change. The roles of women in our society change. The socio-economic backgrounds and the numbers of students change. In short, the tone of a national civilization changes and the Humanities curriculum changes with it. The once exalted birds of the 19th century Humanities curriculum have become the fossilised pterodactyls of today.

At progressive Australian universities the Humanities have come down from their ivory towers in which they once meditated on lofty, transcendental matters and have moved right into the market place. We may still teach the theory of classical Greek tragedy, but we also offer an apprenticeship in print and electronic journalism. We may still teach Renaissance art, but we also teach the professional practice of public relations and advertising. We may still teach Hegelian metaphysics, but we also teach a sociological analysis of popular culture and mass media. We may still teach the ethics of Christianity, but we also teach techniques of management in the tourism industry and hands-on skills in a television studio. This commercialisation of the Humanities curriculum is a revolution in its own right.

If a Humanities curriculum is to have any social power or political credibility, it must in some way reflect or challenge the ethos of the nation from which it originates. The Australian nation in the 1990s, - apart from its almost universal obsession with competitive economics and competitive sport - is a pluralist, post-modernist society which finds it difficult to produce a coherent, single response to the question: What are our cultural, spiritual and ideological objectives in attempting to create a civilization? Not surprisingly, the Humanities today also find it difficult to produce a coherent, single curriculum.

The Humanities cannot provide self-assured, absolute answers, as they sometimes claimed to do in earlier centuries in Europe. But the open discourse in which we compare our culture with foreign cultures and undertake a quest for social and personal values without always achieving personal self-certainty or full social consensus, is at the heart of the Humanities. At the very least, such open discourse can help us to emerge from ignorance, dogmatism and bigotry.

Basically, Humanities educators need to open their eyes and their minds to the outside world as it is now. To take an important example: if one of the objectives of a Humanities education is to impart a love of art and civilization to today's youth, including an appreciation of music, literature, painting and sculpture, how can we hope to achieve this when most university students worship rock music, video clips and disco beat and have never heard of Bach and Beethoven. When they prefer science fiction, detective stories and TV soapy serials to Shakespeare and Goethe, and when there is evidently no widespread basis of awe or love for thousands of years of European cultural achievements?

Nevertheless, it would be the self-defeating act of an ostrich to ignore and despise such modern popular culture. The genre study of modern popular culture can tell us an enormous amount about the character of our society and has as vital a place on the curriculum as Chaucer or Milton. There is no dilemma about choosing between Chaucer and science fiction. We should teach Chaucer and science fiction. I shall return to this problem of high culture and low culture when I discuss Allan Bloom's reactionary elitism in his best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*.⁽¹⁾

It is largely due to unsolved problems of this kind that the last 25 years have witnessed some soul-searching *apologias* for the study of the Humanities at Australian universities. The 1964 Martin Report on Tertiary Education in Australia, for example, argued that:

"the Humanities retain a major - and perhaps the major - responsibility for cultivating the full flowering of man's personality and in civilising man's relationship with man."⁽²⁾

In view of the noble, idealistic sentiment of this passage, it is ironic that its unwittingly sexist language eliminates one half of our population from participating in this wonderful flowering and civilising. This is doubly ironic when you reflect that a statistical analysis of enrolment in the Humanities reveals that approximately 70 per cent of the students are female.

If, however, we agree to ignore this unintended sexist slight, there are further problems to be considered. Taken to its logical extreme, this statement from the Martin Report implies that the more you study the Humanities, the more fully-flowered (or perhaps flowery?) your personality will become and the more civilised your human relationships will become. It therefore follows that we lecturers in the arts faculties of Australia who have given our lives to the study of the Humanities will be the most fully-flowered and the most civilised people on the university campus and in society at large. There are those among you tonight who would dispute this unverified hypothesis. What makes the logic fallacious is the unwarranted assumption that there is a connection between theoretical knowledge and a civilised personality, or a connection between aesthetics and ethics. The statement tends to confuse intellect with wisdom.

A second, related *apologia* for the study of the Humanities claims that they are the sacred guardians of socio-political reform and truth. The Humanities allegedly aim at "the production of a more effective, social, cultural and political critique"⁽³⁾ and have allegedly been "the driving force" behind the "anti-nuclear movement, the campaign against the Vietnam War, the attack on racism, the critique of business practices, the second wave of feminism and the recent upsurge in ecological awareness."⁽⁴⁾ I think, however, that some of my colleagues in, for example, science or in law, not to mention some investigative journalists in the mass media and some senior politicians, might dispute this proud claim of the Humanities to the ethical leadership of our community.

Perhaps, I should illustrate my doubt about the alleged connection between the Humanities and socio-political reform with an historical example. In the 1920s the Humanities at German universities were in full flower and were steeped in "cultural and political critique." But, these same Humanities turned out to be impotent paper tigers in the 1930s when they were confronted with the political power-machine and the seductive pseudo-ideology of Nazism. The Humanities were not successful as a bulwark against tyranny and barbarism. Humanities lecturers and artists were found who embraced Nazi ideology and gave it pseudo-intellectual justification through the thirties and forties. The best that the ethical, cosmopolitan, German representatives of Humanities, art and culture could do was to become political refugees and to spend a decade as bitter emigres in the United States, Mexico or Russia.

I would therefore suggest that it cannot be proven that a study of the Humanities necessarily results in graduates, who are activist reform-leaders or who use their specialised, intellectual knowledge as a platform on which they then display superior civilisation, superior ethics or socio-political maturity.

What then are the Humanities there for? Ian Hunter concludes that the Humanities should abandon these pretentious "avowals of culture and reason" and should be trying "to provide a more worldly and pragmatic account" of their intellectual *raison d'être*.⁽⁵⁾ I agree with Hunter on this point and I would suggest that there are unparalleled opportunities in Australian society today for the Humanities to prove that they can do two kinds of things. They can retain their cherished intellectual independence of government ideology; they can devote themselves to trying to produce cosmopolitan, unprejudiced, tolerant, imaginative, dispassionate and intellectually curious enquirers and researchers. But at the same time, they can strive to produce these qualities of mind in academic fields which bear some relevance to contemporary Australia's commercial and technological ambitions.

This raises the whole issue of the hiatus in Australia today between the traditional, Euro-centric culture of our past and the new Asian-oriented commerce of our present and our future. I am not for a moment proposing in this lecture that we should simply abandon the Humanities study of our English and European heritage. But, I shall argue that it would be otherworldly and unrealistic not to balance the cultural idealism of our Euro-centric studies against the pragmatic justifications for pursuing Asian-oriented studies.

Not of course, that I wish to imply for a moment that Euro-centric studies are without commercial and foreign policy relevance in Australia, nor do I wish to imply that Asian-oriented studies need necessarily be only pragmatic and commercial. The justification of a substantial Humanities re-orientation towards North East Asian and South East Asian cultures in Australia today can be both culturally idealistic and commercially pragmatic.

In any case, the revolutionary move in Australia away from an exclusively Euro-centric to at least a partially Asian-oriented curriculum has only just begun. It is not just a question of a few linguists teaching Japanese or Mandarin Chinese to a handful of esoteric students. It is a question of Asian awareness penetrating to Euro-centric departments of philosophy, politics, literature (English literature?!) and sociology. It is also a question of Asian awareness being exported from the Humanities to the professional faculties and to business and technology. Adrian Chan, a Chinese senior lecturer at the University of New South Wales, recently accused senior Australian academics of remaining "contentedly Euro-centric." He concluded his satirical attack by saying:

"Unless the Asia-Australia Institute, launched by the Prime Minister, is willing to put in an effort to change our Euro-centrism, I am afraid Asian cultures will still be inscrutable for some time to come in the antipodes."⁽⁶⁾

As Australia changes its internal make-up and its international context, so too must the Humanities change. An ideal Humanities curriculum is not an immutable absolute that remains constant through the ages. The Humanities curriculum is as much in service to the changing needs of the nation as any other industry. Industry must turn out products which are needed and wanted by the community or it will find itself with a stockpile of unwanted products and in a state of bankruptcy. The same is true of the Humanities curriculum. The student-graduate-products of the Humanities must be eagerly bought by the employment-market, or the Humanities will be dismissed as irrelevant and they will face their own form of bankruptcy.

Well, what is it that contemporary Australia needs most urgently from its Humanities graduates? Or, putting this question in a larger framework: What do all university graduates in all faculties need to have studied from the Humanities curriculum in order to be most productive in Australian society today?

In response to this question, the Australian Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training produced a report in June 1990 entitled *Priorities for Reform in Higher Education*. The gist of their findings could perhaps be summarised in two statements. The first statement stems from Professor Harry Gelber and is to the effect that:

“Almost all Australian universities now turn out economics graduates who have no acquaintance whatever with history or politics or law; science graduates who have no knowledge of their own societies or even the sociology of science; history and politics graduates who have no idea of how national budgets are formulated let alone about the major scientific ideas or arguments of the age; and engineering students with no concept of the likely impact of technological change on society.”⁽⁷⁾

The second statement originates from Dr Don Anderson who comments that:

“The majority of graduates in medicine, engineering and other science-based professional courses, and to an increasing extent economics, are cultural illiterates - being ignorant of the literature, history, political science and sociology of the society in which they will practise their profession, and on which they, collectively, will have a profound influence.”⁽⁸⁾

That is, Australian universities are allegedly producing “highly trained, highly competent technicians who are undereducated in the conventional sense of that word.”⁽⁹⁾

If this is a correct analysis of a serious deficiency, what do we do about it? The Senate Standing Committee lists five objectives for our university graduates:

- A continued high competence in their professional training
- A sound understanding of the history, cultural traditions and social structure of *the society in which they are going to practise*
- A developed capacity to be flexible, creative thinkers
- An enthusiastic commitment to “lifelong learning” and “keeping abreast of the world of rapid change”
- Lucidity and fluency in oral and written communications

The Senate report goes on to criticize “the narrowness of higher education in Australia” and correctly argues that:

“very few graduates from professional or science faculties have any facility in a language other than English - a situation which compares unfavourably with that in North America and the United Kingdom. In most courses there is little or no opportunity to study other cultures, such as those of the Asia-Pacific region.”

The Senate report concludes that “a policy of complacent monolingualism is increasingly inappropriate as Australia heads towards the 21st century.”⁽¹⁰⁾

The 1987 Fitzgerald Report entitled *A National Strategy for the Study of Asia in Australia*, the 1989 Ingleson Report entitled *Asia in Australian Higher Education* and the 1989 Garnaut Report entitled *Australia and the Northeast Asian Ascendancy* all emphasize Australia's urgent need for trained graduates in Asian languages . These reports are being taken seriously through all levels of Australian education, but there still remains the question: How long will it really take to implement the recommendations in these reports? The answer to this question will define the intensity and the duration of the revolution in the Australian Humanities curriculum which I am attempting to describe tonight.

This revolution will take the Humanities away from its Euro-centric traditions and move it towards an Australia/Asia/Pacific oriented curriculum. It will give the Humanities an entirely new image. No longer will the Humanities be seen as the exalted but irrelevant custodians of the famous cultures and dead classical languages of the European past. This is, after all, a revolution and it will be necessary to slaughter a few sacred cows or at least to cull the herd. The Humanities will no longer be regarded as appropriate only for the education of high school teachers and culture vulture females, while the intelligent, dominant males make careers in medicine, law, science and technology.

The new-wave, commercially oriented Humanities will establish themselves as a government priority and will be thrust into the bustling mainstream of our society. This will happen because enrolment in the Humanities will no longer be attractive only to females, or to inferior students who have failed to win admission to the socially prestigious, big money faculties of medicine and law, or to students who can't make up their minds to dedicate themselves to anything in particular. On the contrary. Humanities will be needed by students in all faculties in order that they can learn a modicum of communication skills and general knowledge of socio-political current affairs and an Asian language. If this revolution does not take place very quickly, we shall not produce a "clever Australia", but rather a society with a class of narrowly trained professionals who are ignorant morons.

The Humanities revolution which I am describing could take one of three forms in practical terms. All three forms would be relatively expensive because they will inevitably lengthen the period of university study for the ambitious undergraduate. The least expensive form is the introduction of a year of Foundation Studies spent in acquiring professional-standard communication skills, university-level mathematics skills and an analytic knowledge of contemporary world affairs. This year of Foundation Studies could be used as a pre-requisite for admission to law, medicine, dentistry and veterinary science. (It would be preferable of course if admission to these professional faculties were only possible after completion of a three year Arts degree.) Given the fact that Australia is now attempting to give a university education to over 30 per cent of its high school matriculants, some of whom are culturally illiterate and functionally innumerate for university purposes, this year of Foundation Studies has become a necessity if we are to maintain the academic standards of our university graduates.

A second form of curriculum revolution would be to introduce specially designed, end-on, graduate diplomas in Asian Studies and Asian Languages for graduates of business, law, science and engineering. This intensive graduate diploma in Asia-literacy would have to feature at least three months total immersion study in the target Asian country.

The third possible revolution in the Humanities mission in Australia is really more concerned with the mode of delivery and the democratic availability of university education. But, it is also connected with the goal of creating a "clever Australia" where people, and the professional classes in particular, are dedicated to "lifelong learning." This revolution in mode of delivery would create a national, open university of the air, ⁽¹¹⁾ using radio and television transmission by satellite or by cable, video film and electronic computer mail to communicate knowledge to a vast, national audience. The electronic audience would include both mature-age learners seeking a first degree and professionals who want to broaden their cultural awareness now that they have acquired their professional qualifications and are in practice. This development could of course only be termed revolutionary in Australia, as similar public broadcast or cable television education has long flourished in such countries as the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

In an age of interactive video discs, computer discs, satellite dishes and electronic mail, it is more than faintly ridiculous and self-indulgent that we are clinging to a technique of face to face lectures at 50 to 60 university campuses throughout Australia, when professionally prepared videotapes of the most brilliant experts on this topic in Australia and overseas could easily be substituted. The only progress which we have made to-date towards this open university of the air is the creation of the eight Distance Education Centres in Australia, of which UCCQ has the honour to be one.

Let us return, however, to the substantive issue in this lecture: the transformation of the Humanities from solemn custodians of the sacred, cultural past to a radically new role. This new role encompasses the following ambitions for the Humanities to be:

- Sought after purveyors of essential socio-political information about our society and foreign societies in the global present
- Provocative stimulators of intellectual and philosophical debate about current world affairs and think-tank predictors of future trends
- Teachers of foreign language skills who are urgently needed for Australia's commercial future

The future of the Humanities is therefore interdisciplinary and inter-faculty. Humanities are not subjects learnt by a small group of specialist students. They are service subjects available to all students in all faculties. These service subjects will need to be regarded by Business students and Engineering students as relevant to their professional ambitions. I believe that it is only possible to achieve this relevance to other faculties, if the defensive walls of the traditional castle departments such as English, History, Philosophy, Geography, Anthropology, French Language and Literature and German Language and Literature come tumbling down.

We live in a dynamic, experimental, forward-looking world and not at all in a pious, traditional, backward-looking culture. Most of our three and four year graduates must be equipped as interdisciplinary generalists whose knowledge is relevant to the character of this new world by virtue of being cosmopolitan, contemporary and applied.

For example, it is a reasonable objective to say that our Humanities-graduates should have interdisciplinary knowledge in linguistic, cultural, historical, geographic, philosophical, environmental, sociological, political and economic knowledge of the Australian/East Asian/Western Pacific region. We need more interdisciplinary Centres of North East Asian and South East Asian and Pacific Rim Studies at our universities for teaching, research and providing expert advice to government and business.

This will require a radical re-orientation, re-structuring and re-focusing of our Humanities-curriculum and it will also require the recruitment of academic staff with very different research expertise and teaching methodology from that of the traditional, independent and isolated lecturer. It will be very difficult to achieve the radical changes needed in the conservative, Australian educational system and considerable administrative entrepreneurialism will be required. As Fitzgerald pointed out, the Asianisation of the Humanities curriculum will need to be coordinated between the primary and secondary school system and the university sector. This will be our version of vertical integration, or if you prefer the image, of an educational traffic system with coordinated flow-through traffic lights.

What I am saying is that we need to produce a majority of graduates who do not identify themselves to employers by saying: "I majored in English Lit. or I majored in History or Metaphysical Philosophy." We want Humanities graduates who identify themselves by saying: "I am a generalist with interdisciplinary expertise in either Japanese or Korean or Chinese or Indonesian or Western Pacific Studies with a working knowledge of an Asian language." (There will also need to be a requirement in primary school, secondary school and university that students take at least one foreign language.) But, it is not only Humanities graduates who will need to prove that they are Asia-literate when they seek employment. We want Business, Science and Engineering graduates too who can say: "I have a professional degree and in addition I have a working knowledge of an Asian language and its culture."

I am of course not suggesting for a minute that our Australian universities should discard 150 years of tradition in Euro-centric studies and English civilization. There are overwhelming reasons of cultural heritage and national identity to uphold these traditional studies. Nevertheless, they too would benefit from an interdisciplinary re-structuring, such as already exists at some of our newer universities. These centres would be supported by specialist, foreign language teaching cadres which operate with a completely different kind of timetable and methodology of learning from the intellectual disciplines.

The Humanities in Australia are responsible for imparting general knowledge of our world today to all university students and for ensuring that all university students learn at least the basics of one Asian or European foreign language and its culture. This is simply not happening. One of the more alarming proofs that this is not happening is the general knowledge quiz run in 1990 by *The Australian*.⁽¹²⁾ This general knowledge quiz recorded that our 15 year old high school students revealed a catastrophic ignorance of current world affairs, geography, politics and art.

Detractors of this general knowledge test argue that as a multiple-choice quiz it has no more educational relevance than *Sale of the Century* or *Trivial Pursuit*. They argue further that we live in an age of information explosion where students are not required to ingest facts by tedious rote learning, but rather to know how to access data-bases which contain these facts for easy reference. One irate headmaster has argued persuasively that it was more important for his students to know about greenhouse gases, land degradation, causes of pollution and species loss than it was for them to know the exact position of Holland on the map of Europe.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that an imaginative and relevant variation of this test should be administered throughout Australia as a diagnostic admissions test to all faculties. This test would lead to streaming of knowledgeable and less knowledgeable students in the proposed year of Foundation Studies. I believe that the results of this proposed diagnostic test and admissions examination would shame us. Shame not only those of us who are professional educators, but shame our whole community into realising that we Australians need a whole new social ethos if we are ever to become a "clever Australia." A Humanities education needs to be thought of by Australian society at large as equally important and equally exciting as competitive sport.

There is nothing particularly new or revolutionary in the idea of giving an Asian focus to the Humanities curriculum in Australia. Some of the newer universities, such as Griffith and Murdoch, have been pioneers in this field for almost 20 years. But there are quite a few problems associated with an Asian-oriented curriculum that we have yet to solve. The first problem is that Australians have yet to realise just how much commitment and just how many years it takes to obtain real fluency in an Asian language. The second problem is that schools and universities are often not the most efficient places to learn a foreign language because of the time constraints of other competing subjects. Total immersion in linguistic short courses followed by a reasonable sojourn in the foreign country is a more efficient and effective method. A third problem is that there are at the moment insufficient, qualified teachers to offer Asian languages on the national scale proposed in the Fitzgerald Report. A fourth problem is that the knowledge of a foreign language has still not been made compulsory in Australian schools. A fifth problem is that there seems to be little convincing evidence that Australian business firms and Australian government departments are offering significant incentives and rewards to graduates who have gone to considerable pains to learn an Asian language and an Asian culture. A sixth problem is that there is still ambiguity or even hostility towards the notion of a considerable Asian culture presence in Australian society.

It used to be that at universities we learnt about a foreign culture through its literature. But, it seems now predictable that the literature of foreign cultures and indeed the literature of our own culture will remain the preserve of an elitist few. High literature, as Marshall McLuhan predicted some 30 years ago, is either being marginalised or subsumed into electronic cultural entertainment. Ladies and gentlemen, are we not all in the wrong place and engaged in the wrong activity tonight? Shouldn't we all be at home with our library videotapes on Asia-literacy or our interactive, self-teaching video discs or at least with our self-access database on East Asian-Australian relations on our personal micro-computers, working at our own speed to give ourselves a real education?

Am I not myself a victim of the very revolution in the Humanities which I am describing this evening? By accepting a chair in comparative literature, I have perhaps made myself an anachronistic dinosaur in my own time. It has therefore become clear to me in a dream that my professorial chair will need to be widened, - particularly as I put on weight and dignity, - to a double chair in literature and electronic cultural studies. I shall teach electronic popular culture studies partly for light relief and partly so that I do not lose my audience. When I am comfortably ensconced in this new double chair, I shall return to this lecture theatre to speak again on some aspect of electronic popular cultural studies such as "How the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Batman, Superman, James Bond 007, Luke Skywalker, Crocodile Dundee, Captain Kirk and Spock, Roger Rabbit, Orphan Annie and E.T. saved the world for conservative, patriarchal, WASP families."

It is useful to put my discussion of a revolution in the Humanities in Australia in the wider context of the United Kingdom and the United States. In the United Kingdom there has been a philistine, utilitarian and draconian cutback in the Humanities, particularly in the polytechnics and the junior colleges, and this revision may have a lot in common with the anticultural commercialisation and technologisation of university objectives in Australia. In the United States however, there is a reverse trend in which American academies have reaffirmed their faith in the educational need for a generalist, Humanities education. In 1989 the American National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) produced a booklet entitled *50 Hours. A Core Curriculum for College Students*.⁽¹³⁾ This booklet was produced in response to a survey which showed that it was possible to graduate from:

- "78 percent of the nation's colleges and universities without ever taking a course in the history of Western civilization;
- 45 percent of the colleges and universities without taking a course in American or English literature;
- 77 percent of the colleges and universities without studying a foreign language." (pp. 7-8)

The NEH proposes to overcome this problem by requiring interdisciplinary core courses in civilization and culture, which combine the approaches of literature, music, arts and architecture in the various epochs of recorded civilization together with philosophical and political studies.

The attractive feature of this kind of core curriculum is that it overcomes fragmentation and what the Germans call "Fachsimpelei" (narrow-minded overspecialisation) and ensures a common body of knowledge and scholarly sensibility to which professors can make comparative reference as they teach their specialised majors. A core curriculum also reduces the plethora of certain electives which are known on campus by such sobriquets as "Mickey Mouse", "navel-gazing" and "shooting the breeze."

The potential disadvantages of the core curriculum included the risk which all survey courses run of being superficial and confusing (the "Today is Tuesday, We Must be in Belgium" syndrome). There is also the risk that such survey courses cross so many linguistic and cultural borders that they end up being dilettantish and lacking in scholarly rigour. One could argue that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, provided the students are encouraged to grapple with specific, primary texts in seminar debates and in analytic essays (as opposed to learning off lists of dates and events for multiple-choice examinations).

The mark of success of a core curriculum is not how many facts students have memorized after three years, but whether they have been inspired to go on reading about diverse civilizations for pleasure for the rest of their lives. In fact, these civilization courses are often more successful at open universities with mature-age students, who have successfully put the years of teenage narcissism behind them and who are genuinely excited about expanding their horizons.

A pre-requisite for the success of these survey courses is lecturers who are dedicated to interdisciplinary team-teaching and who are offered professional career incentives to reward them for this time-consuming dedication. At the moment we tend to reward precisely the opposite qualities, namely research specialisation and publication in arcane journals which are only read by other specialists.

The basic flaw with the proposed *50 Hours* core curriculum is that it is pious and starry-eyed rather than revolutionary and provocative. The focus of a core curriculum should be on the chaos of our contemporary world. It should include an in-depth study of the causes of wars in the 20th century, or of global pollution, or of finite world resources and the population explosion, or of the dilemmas of energy technology, or most importantly, of an interdisciplinary approach to the overwhelming problems of the Third World (based on professional expertise with an appropriate foreign language). Maybe all of these topics are more urgent and compelling than the *Babylonian Creation Myth Enuma Elish* or the *Egyptian Memphite Theology* (p. 19) or Leibniz's *Monadology* (p. 41) or *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (p.33). One wonders sometimes whether the small, intellectual and investigative sections of our better print and electronic media don't offer students more contemporary challenges and problems to be solved than many traditional Humanities curricula.

Well, why is a Humanities education needed by the citizens of Australia? This question has been addressed again and again in Australia in the last few years, particularly in the context of the economy-oriented utilitarianism of the John Dawkins-revolution. One of the most powerful answers, however, has come from the United States. Allan Bloom's monograph, *The Closing of the American Mind. How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* has perhaps been such a popular success in the United States because its title (and even more its subtitle) imply a passionate confession of cultural failure in the United States and an idealistic desire for improvement of the whole nation's educational system, its socio-cultural values and even its religious outlook. In contrast to Australia, where laconic cynicism about university education, religion and politics is widespread, in the United States there is more likely to be found earnestness, idealism and a sometimes naive passion about higher education.

Bloom writes a diatribe of loathing against the pernicious influence of television and rock music. He argues persuasively that television and rock music have replaced books on history, literature and philosophy for young people and that so-called popular culture and the electronic media have produced increasing illiteracy and morally irresponsible masturbatory fantasies in place of independent thought and debate. Bloom further argues that the chaos of Humanities educators today has its origins in the student revolution of the 1960s when obligatory core courses were abandoned in favour of a myriad of electives, for which "relevance" meant little more than that their content had been politicised and trivialised.

The current accent on the vocational training of accountants and natural scientists means that we are in danger of entrusting our civilization to barbarians and robots, who have been given no education in the traditions of Western civilization. Nor have the Humanities done their duty in guarding the sacred literature, history and philosophy of the West, says Bloom. On the contrary, the Humanities are "the almost submerged old Atlantis" because we Humanities educators cannot agree among ourselves on what absolutely must be taught and what is peripheral. Bloom writes brilliant prose and the spiritual essence of his thesis could be represented with this striking statement:

"Students have powerful images of what a perfect body is and pursue it incessantly. But, deprived of literary guidance they no longer have any image of a perfect soul, and hence do not long to have one. They do not even imagine that there is such a thing."

Bloom argues that the West is suffering from a public malaise which is caused by moral and cultural relativism, the lack of accepted absolute values, the narcissistic individualism, the infantile triviality and the mindless vulgarity of the American (or Australian) democratic masses. But, this is a conservative and patrician viewpoint of popular culture characterised by disdain, pessimism and hostility to democracy. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Bloom's thesis, however, is that the mediocrity and soullessness of popular culture have infected the Humanities curriculum at our universities. Bloom's cure for this malaise is radical. He proposed to gather the faithful few around him and withdraw to the ivory-towers of a few select Ivy-League universities. There he and his disciples will worship the great books of classical learning. This concept seems to me to be akin to medieval monasticism. It is therefore not surprising to see that Bloom's concept of a philosophy-curriculum, for example, amounts to the cultivation of other worldly mysticism and reverence for the lost culture of the past.

Bloom arrogantly banishes hoi palloi from his monastic vision of academic and spiritual excellence and the banners of exclusive elitism are defiantly unfurled. Presumably, if the democratic American public ever actually read Bloom's book (as opposed to buying it in a zealous fit of cultural self-improvement from their book of the month club), they might well be appalled by its hostility to egalitarianism and to good, old pragmatic Yankee-know-how.

Bloom's book serves a useful purpose however much one may disagree with his recommendations, because he raises the whole issue of the purpose of philosophy in our contemporary world.

The Australian Academy of the Humanities recently published an anthology of essays entitled *The Relevance of the Humanities*. In his contribution, philosopher Tony Coady argues that both teaching and research in philosophy must be free of jargon and be of relevance to the community. Of the contemporary moral and logical task of philosophy, he says:

"Reproductive technology, AIDS, insider trading, business behaviour generally, police powers, immigration, war, welfare policy, and equal opportunity issues, all fundamentally require attention to matters on which philosophers are professionally engaged." ⁽¹⁵⁾

These philosophical arguments on current issues in our society do, of course, need to be enlightened by comparative reference to parallel problems either elsewhere on the planet or in earlier civilizations. It is these comparative references to other cultures, which overcome "the closing of the mind" or the phenomenon of "navel-gazing." But, the scholarly knowledge of the past is only pertinent if in the long range it is used to help us grapple with the problems of the present. There are, after all, many ways in which a mind can be "closed off" and there are many ways to "open it up." Perhaps a mind, which is aware of Plato's dialogues, but knows nothing of the economies of super-rich nations (or classes) and abjectly poor nations (or classes) in the East Asian/West Pacific region today is dangerously "closed off." Perhaps a mind which has no direct knowledge of Aristotle or Sophocles, but which has an objective understanding of the role of such ideologies as capitalism, communism, welfare socialism and national socialism in 20th century social history in both Europe and Asia, is "usefully open."

The Humanities cannot be identified with a passive, "safe" knowledge of the past. They must be seen as provocative and headline-grabbing in their debate about the present. This debate must illuminate possible, different options for our civilization to follow, must encourage personal creativity at all levels and must in so doing invent a new kind of cultural idealism - not the nostalgic, impotent idealism of elderly emigres and ladies with fox furs who belong to Dante Alighieri and Goethe Societies, but the virile, provocative cultural idealism of philosophers and historians and *litterateurs* who challenge the commercial materialism of our age and present a credible alternative.

Only if we in the Humanities prove within the current network of Australian universities that we are relevant to the emergency issues of today, shall we have an opportunity to act as a "Humanizing" brake on the juggernauts of science, technology and commercialism. Only in this way shall we be able to have some little influence on the "brave new world" of our science fiction future. Only in this way can we hope to improve the quality of the lifestyle of our societies and combat the primitivity of much of our society's leisure past-times.

If, on the other hand, Australia were to create an electronic open university of the air accessible to people of all ages, we in the Humanities could have a quite different mission. We could stop worrying about all these utilitarian attacks on the irrelevance of the Humanities to the market-place. If education were truly regarded as a joyful learning process for a lifetime, we in the Humanities would have time to be both Euro-centric and Asian-oriented and to compare past civilizations with our own in a way that would at least raise the level of cocktail party conversation all over Australia.

It is precisely because the Western World has become arguably a society with much leisure time, that the creation of electronic open universities for leisure-time study becomes so desirable. The creative use of leisure time may become the benchmark of civilization or barbarism in our society. In an open university available to all in their leisure time, Humanities would not be trying to train teenagers for a professional career in as few years as possible. On the contrary, they would be providing stimulation of the mind and the imagination for a lifetime in order to improve the quality of individual life and defeat the monotony of mindless boredom.

The essential thing here is to convince people that a Humanities education is not a form of intellectual imprisonment, which is inflicted by perverted old professors on teenagers in order to restrict their personal liberty and happiness. A Humanities education is not three years of painful training after which young graduates can breathe a sigh of relief and never open a serious book again in their whole life. A Humanities education aims so to excite the imagination and sensibility of students with a seductive first taste, that students will become "Humanities-addicts" or "culture-junkies" for the rest of their lives.

It is the deeper mission of the Humanities and the creative arts to tap the well-springs of individual personality and so release the only satisfying answer to the depressing mystery of transience and mortality: artistic creativity. A Humanities-education is ideally a lifetime companion who says "Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide, In thy most need to go by thy side."

ENDNOTES

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind . How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987.
2. The Martin Report on Tertiary Education in Australia: Report of the Committee on *The Future of Tertiary Education in Australia*, 1964, vol III, p. 15.
3. C.A.J. Coady, "The Academy and the State", in the *Australian Universities' Review*, 31, 1. 1988, pp. 16-17.
4. Judith Brett, "Uphill Battle for the Humanities", in *Australian Society*, February 1988, p. 32.
5. Ian Hunter, "Accounting for the Humanities", *Meanjin*, August 1989 (??), pp. 438-447.
6. Adrian Chan, "Euro-centrics the real culprits", *HES, The Australian*, 31.10.90, p.
7. Harry Gelber, as reported in *Priorities for Reform in Higher Education*, A Report by the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, June 1990, AGPS, Canberra, chapter one, p. 4.
8. Don Anderson in the Report by the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *op. cit.*, chapter one, p. 4.
9. Don Anderson, *op. cit.*, chapter one, p.1.
10. *Priorities for Reform in Higher Education*, *op. cit.*, p. 43
11. Cf Barry Jones, *Sleepers, Wake! Technology and the Future of Work*, Oxford University Press, Australia, 1982 (1990 edition), p. 243, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8.
12. See *The Weekend Australian*, "Schools Test", 27-28 October 1990, p.1 and pp. 7-8.
13. Lynne V. Cheney, Chairman, *50 Hours. A Core Curriculum for College Students* (National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, D.C., October 1989).
14. Tony Coady concurs with this criticism of Bloom, maintaining that his elitism is "destructive of much of the significance of the intellectual culture itself" (Tony Coady, "The Justification of Philosophy" in *The Relevance of the Humanities*, ed. A.M. Gibbs, Occasional Paper No. 8, Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1990, p. 55).
15. Tony Coady, *op. cit.* p. 45.

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