

poetry, oratory, and liturgy can all have in common the power to stir us into recognition of something that we cannot quite name, and the remarkable longevity of Newman's book, which exhibits features of all three genres, suggests it still retains some of this power. The twenty-first century university needs a literary voice of comparable power to articulate in the idiom of our own time the ideal of the untrammelled quest for understanding, but until such a work is written, we have good reason to keep the photograph on the mantelpiece.

## 4 The Character of the Humanities

In contemporary public discussion of universities, it invariably proves more difficult to characterize the nature of teaching and research in the humanities, and thus to explain their value, than it does to give such an account of the scientific, medical, and technological disciplines. In reality, public understanding of these latter disciplines may be no more informed or accurate than it is of the humanities, but a familiar and easily graspable case can be made in terms of 'discovering' truths about the natural world and then applying those discoveries to better the human condition. A no less cogent case can, of course, be made about the importance of understanding the human world, though it is misleading if this is couched exclusively in terms of discovering new truths, and anyway the immediate benefits of such improved understanding are harder to specify briefly. As a result, public statements about the humanities, in particular, tend to fall back on a sequence of abstract nouns which, though they are in some sense both appropriate and accurate, always risk the danger of sounding pious and lifeless.

A further difficulty is that in present circumstances any invitation to *characterize* the work of scholars in the humanities is almost immediately construed as a demand to *justify* it. It is true that all descriptions will have elements of valuation built into them, and so any characterization can be made to serve the purposes of justification. But there is, as I have suggested, an inescapable element of defensiveness in all attempts to vindicate one's activity – an assumption that the demand

issues from unsympathetic premises and an anticipation of resistance or dismissiveness on the part of those who do not share our starting-points. This chapter is not written in that spirit. Instead, it attempts to explore, in relatively informal terms, what actually goes on in the humanities, and what the practice of at least some of these disciplines is like (the practice I shall concentrate on is the activity of scholarship rather than of teaching, though that boundary is not as clear-cut as is often assumed). A few common misconceptions will be challenged along the way, but only in its final section, once such a characterization has been put in place, does the chapter directly address the vexed issue of how best to go about 'defending' the humanities.

Perhaps the most important single thing to say in this context about work in the humanities is that it is in many ways not so different from work in the natural and social sciences. The effort to understand and explain that is at the heart of all scholarly and scientific enquiry is governed by broadly similar canons of accuracy and precision, of rigour in argument and clarity in presentation, of respect for the evidence and openness to criticism, and so on. Biologists may, in their own way, examine the relevant evidence no less systematically and dispassionately than, in their own way, do historians; physicists may use concepts and forms of notation which are, in their own way, every bit as abstract and precise as those deployed by philosophers. All kinds of distinctions can be drawn among various disciplines and groups of disciplines in terms of method, subject-matter, outcomes, and so on, but these distinctions do not all map neatly on to one another so as to fall into two mutually exclusive groups. And all disciplines involve, ultimately, a similar drive towards open-ended understanding, so, for that reason, all disciplines have a stake in the well-being of the university. One reason to be cautious about isolating the humanities for separate discussion is that it can seem to encourage lazy notions of there being 'two cultures', and most versions of that hackneyed claim are misleading and obstructive.

Of course, for various institutional and practical purposes certain disciplines have to be grouped together, though we should be aware, first, that the lines of division are drawn differently not just in different countries but even in different universities within the same country,

and, second, that these groupings have changed over time. At present, 'the humanities' represents one such pragmatic grouping, but it is worth noting that this arrangement, and this use of the label, are both comparatively recent. The nineteenth century mostly operated with several more traditional terms, such as 'letters' or (in more theorized or self-conscious settings) 'the moral sciences'; in time, British universities came to use 'arts' as the convenient organizational antonym for 'sciences'. 'The humanities', a term not very widely used in that century, generally connoted the study of the Classics, and 'Humanity' in the singular could be used as a synonym for Latin literature (in some Scottish universities the Professor of Latin was known as the 'Professor of Humanity' into the second half of the twentieth century). The use of the plural term in its contemporary sense gained currency in the USA in the middle decades of the twentieth century, especially as part of a response to an aggressive form of positivism that promoted the supposed methods of the natural sciences as the basis for all true knowledge. This usage became increasingly widespread in Britain in the course of the 1940s and 1950s: the appearance in 1964 of a 'Pelican Original' entitled *Crisis in the Humanities* provoked discussion of various kinds, but the use of that collective label was by then uncontroversial. However, this brief history signals two related themes which have remained characteristic of so much discourse about the humanities: first, it has been largely reactive and has thus tended to have a defensive or vindictory edge to it in a way not true of most discourse about 'the sciences'; and secondly, the humanities turn out to be almost always in 'crisis'. There has been a good deal of writing under that heading in the USA in the past decade, and a similar urge to draw the wagons into a circle is evident in the humanities departments of British universities at present in response to recent government policies.

The current edition of the *OED* defines this usage of 'the humanities' as follows: 'The branch of learning concerned with human culture; the academic subjects collectively comprising this branch of learning, as history, literature, ancient and modern languages, law, philosophy, art, and music.' This rightly makes the academic location of the term primary, and its illustrative list of disciplines would not

cause too many eyebrows to be raised, though it might need saying that art and music are normally only included when understood as objects of scholarly study – as, for example, in art history or musicology – rather than as forms of creative practice. Going beyond lexicography, it may be helpful to say that the label ‘the humanities’ is now taken to embrace that collection of disciplines which attempt to understand, across barriers of time and culture, the actions and creations of other human beings considered as bearers of meaning, where the emphasis tends to fall on matters to do with individual or cultural distinctiveness and not on matters which are primarily susceptible to characterization in purely statistical or biological terms. This may be a better way of putting it than the rather hackneyed distinction between studying the human as opposed to the physical world: disciplines such as demography or neuropsychology deal with human beings, but only incidentally with individuals or groups as bearers of meanings, and it is for that reason that we would not normally include them under the heading of the humanities. This formula does not allow a hard-and-fast distinction to be drawn between the humanities and the social sciences: several of the disciplines usually classed among the latter exhibit an interpretive or cultural dimension as well as more theoretical or quantitative characteristics – this is true, in different ways, of such disciplines as politics, anthropology, and archaeology. Sometimes the same subject-matter may be part of the inheritance of fields on either side of the notional fence: political thought is studied by intellectual historians as well as by political scientists; past social behaviour is grist to the sociologist as well as to the social historian. Linguistics, a particular problem for tidy-minded classifiers, has some common ground with historians of language and even with literary critics, yet it also shares some approaches with experimental psychology and acoustics.

One response to the porousness and instability of the boundaries of ‘the humanities’ is to seek to restrict the term to some kind of indisputable heartland, confining the label to the study of the masterpieces of Western thought and literature. This response is particularly evident in some recent discussions of the role of the humanities in the United States, where the focus has been on pedagogy, with a tendency to issue

in justifications of ‘great books’ courses. But to restrict the term in this way flies in the face of what is now established usage, as well as being undesirable on other, practical grounds. The label needs to encompass the whole body of learning and exact scholarship that has been built up in the study of ancient and modern languages, of various forms of history, of art, music, religion and culture generally, in the past and the present, not just the works of the great writers and philosophers.

All this may seem to be a matter of taxonomy – important for those with something at stake in being part of one category rather than another, but inevitably rather arid and lifeless when viewed from further away. Nonetheless, it may be helpful to be reminded at the outset of the diversity of types of work grouped together as the humanities, since most general statements about that category tend to have a flattening effect, representing the forms of enquiry as more uniform than they actually are. A quick visit to the relevant sections of a good academic library reveals how dissimilar, even in its appearance on the page, scholarship in these different areas can be. From the numbered propositions or symbol-strewn sentences of short journal articles in philosophy, through the cumulative and extensively footnoted arrangement of empirical evidence in a 500-page work of history, and on to a collection of stylish essays in literary criticism – the forms of work in the humanities are almost as diverse as the cultural and temporal variety of their subject-matter.

Faced with shelf after shelf of books and articles on what may seem to be a limited and repetitive range of topics, the lay reader is prone to wonder what there can possibly be left to say. Surely by now scholars know all there is to know about Shakespeare or the causes of the French Revolution or the arguments for freedom of the will. Granted that in a few cases genuinely new evidence may come to light, as the lucky scholar stumbles on a hitherto-unknown work that had been mis-catalogued or tracks down a suitcase of revealing letters in the dusty attic of some famous person’s descendant. But mostly, muses the lay reader, scholars seem to be writing about the same texts, the same material, the same problems as their predecessors have been doing for, in some areas, many generations. So what exactly are they doing?

What they, we, are doing much of the time is worrying. The default condition of the scholar is one of intellectual dissatisfaction. No matter how exhilarating it may be to discover new evidence or come up with an illuminatingly apt characterization, one can never (and perhaps should never) entirely banish the sense that the current state of one's work can only ever have the status of an interim report, always vulnerable to being challenged, corrected, or simply bypassed. The mind searches for pattern, for a kind of order, but this is a restless, endless process. One of the things that can make a book influential in the humanities – and it is usually a book, since a fairly wide canvas is needed to display the pattern in all its persuasive detail – is that the pattern which it proposes becomes the framework for much subsequent scholarship in the particular area. Obvious examples of books which shaped a whole sub-field a generation or more ago might include E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), or Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), or John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), and in some respects those works never lose their pertinence. However, not only are such books subjected to more or less constant criticism and revision (including by their own authors), but there is a sense in which a particular scholarly community simply moves on – moves on to other topics, or to using different methods, or to asking new questions. That it does so is not entirely a matter of the discovery of new empirical evidence or the operation of intellectual fashion or shifting pressures from the outside world, though these can all have a part to play. It is, more fundamentally, because no starting-point is beyond re-consideration, because no assumptions (about how societies change or how people act or how meanings mean) are beyond challenge, because no vocabulary has an exclusive monopoly. And this is where that existential state of intellectual dissatisfaction turns into something like a methodological precept. It will, in practice, require experienced judgement to decide at what point asking a different kind of question is a fruitful way to proceed and when it is simply going to be obstructive or irrelevant. But in principle no question can be ruled out in advance. Someone else can always start from somewhere else – and so, therefore, can we. There can only ever be interim reports.

This is one of the places where insisting on the difference between knowledge and understanding becomes vital. How we understand a particular topic depends, among other things, on what else we already understand. The point here is akin to that made long ago about the search for authenticity in the so-called 'early music' movement: we may play the pieces on period instruments but we cannot listen to them with period ears. Part of the reason why we, now, cannot understand Shakespeare in exactly the same way as, say, A. C. Bradley did in his classic work on *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) is not just because our knowledge of that particular writer has advanced, but because our understanding of so much else has changed. It is true that we know more now than we did a century ago about, for example, the transmission of Shakespeare's texts or about the conditions of Elizabethan stagecraft. But, more fundamentally, we have encountered different ideas about matters as various as the operation of ethnic stereotyping or the social subordination of women as well as about the interpretation of character in drama in general or even about the relation between writing and meaning. In some respects, scholarship attempts to come as close as we can to acquiring period ears, to become more and more familiar with the language and assumptions of the period in which a work was written. But, still, it is we who are doing the understanding, and we are trying to communicate that understanding to a contemporary audience in a contemporary idiom. We couldn't simply repeat the perceptions and judgements of a hundred years ago even if we tried.

One of the most striking illustrations of the way in which starting from somewhere else can result in a rich harvest of new insights and interpretations is the transforming effect that attending to questions of gender and sexuality has had on so many areas of scholarship in the past three decades. In its most obvious form this has brought whole bodies of previously neglected or unknown material into focus. For example, every literary scholar's awareness of the range of significant writing by women in earlier centuries has been extended in ways never imagined a couple of generations ago, just as there are now whole areas of social and cultural history which barely existed before historians began systematically to quiz the evidence from earlier

centuries about the activities of that half of the population which scarcely figured in many public records. But such a change of perspective can inspire new work in less obvious ways, too. For instance, some moral and political philosophers began to ask themselves questions about the implicitly male characteristics of the standpoint from which agency is assessed or about the gendered nature of certain measures of well-being. Not all the claims and re-interpretations that have resulted from asking this particular set of questions have stood up to subsequent examination, any more than have those issuing from other kinds of broadly revisionist surges, but the landscape of scholarship across the humanities has been decisively modified in ways that seem unlikely simply to disappear in the future.

Even if all this is granted, and all the new topics and perspectives are acknowledged as legitimate extensions of the range and interpretive power of scholarship, still the outside observer is prone to feel that an awful lot of the energy of scholars in the humanities does not seem to be directed to discovering new material but instead to contorting other scholars. And this is not just a matter of correcting particular mistakes of fact or errors of interpretation, but rejection of the other scholars' whole approach. How can it be, it is asked, that disciplines that have existed in some form for decades or even for centuries have not yet managed to resolve the most basic issues of approach and method? Actually, the conclusion drawn from this observation of continuing dispute is exaggerated. Even members of rival 'schools' within a particular discipline share a hugely greater area of agreement, often unspoken, about legitimate procedures and established truths than the headline-grabbing confrontation over points of difference might suggest. But still, there simply is a lot of fundamental dispute within the humanities, and perhaps the proper response to this fact is not to see these disciplines as failed sciences (not that such disagreement is absent from the sciences either), but to recognize how closely work in these fields is bound up with the most fundamental aspects of being human. It scarcely surprises us that there is no one agreed account of what it is to live a life or indeed that there is no agreed way adequately to frame that issue as a topic for enquiry in the first place, and it should, therefore, not surprise us that

all attempts to understand aspects of human life, past or present, no matter how disciplined they may be in their analysis of concepts and their handling of evidence, will reproduce some of this fundamental lack of agreement.

One way to understand the role of what is now often referred to simply as 'theory' in the literary and historical disciplines is to say that 'theory' is what happens when common starting-points can no longer be taken for granted. For example, literary critics in the English-speaking world in the 1950s and 1960s disagreed about many things – about the authorship of certain Jacobean plays or about the influence of Keats on Tennyson or about whether D. H. Lawrence was a great writer – but for the most part they did not disagree about whether the evaluation of literary worth was legitimate or even possible, or indeed about whether there was such a category as 'literature'. When all these concepts and procedures are defamiliarized, made to seem culturally contingent rather than logically necessary, debate has to move to a more theoretical or abstract level. But once again, this is not a form of pathology, not something that happens because there is nothing more to say about the established canon or because literary scholars have lost interest in literature (though some may have). It may, rather, be an index of health, or at least a sign that scholars cannot and should not be immune to the intellectual changes consequent upon living in a more diverse society in which the assumptions shared by certain traditional elites no longer command general assent.

And something like this is also the proper response to the charge repeatedly levelled against the humanities in recent decades, particularly but not exclusively by right-wing commentators, that scholarship has been 'corrupted' by being 'politicized'. For there can be no understanding of human history and human self-expression that does not work with categories and concepts that have a political dimension. Where a dominant discourse is unchallenged, these political dimensions can be allowed to remain implicit, effectively invisible, but they are still there. Within particular areas of scholarship, these issues may be bracketed off, set aside, or merely taken for granted. The drive of theoretical critique is to bring such matters to the surface and to make *them* the focus of attention. Once again, explicit attention to

long-unchallenged premises can be made to appear as the illegitimate introduction into scholarly exchange of matters that do not belong there, but most often such critique is a way of registering the pressure of wider social and cultural changes on the always restless, never settled, attempt to expand understanding.

The fact that scholarship in the humanities must, at least in part, deploy the language of everyday description is, paradoxically, one source of another recurring complaint by journalists, reviewers, and others. This complaint assumes, partly because of the presence of such everyday language, that all work in the humanities should be readily intelligible to non-specialist readers, and so when it encounters various forms of specialized professional discourse it cries foul. Because most of the individual words look familiar, it is assumed that the meanings of the sentences and paragraphs which they help to make up should be readily intelligible as well. And of course in many cases, particularly in historical and literary subjects, they are. But it is part of the search for precision in any field to attempt to use terms in carefully specified senses, and after a while there will be no need to remind fellow-specialists that a term is being used in that sense because it has become second nature to all those who spend their working lives reading such material. Readers coming from outside – from outside that discipline, which may not mean from outside the university; we are all non-specialists in relation to all other fields – may be at first misled into assuming that a particular term (and others like it) is being used in its familiar sense and may then quickly become resentful on finding that what they thought was an inviting path is in practice an impenetrable thicket. This then feeds into the larger charge, which in turn has a long history, that specialization has gone ‘too far’ and academic scholarship in the humanities has cut itself off from the ‘general reader’. For the most part, this reproach is not now levelled at those working in the natural sciences, or even many of the social sciences: it is accepted that the non-specialist cannot expect to be able to read an article published in a professional journal in, say, molecular biology or atomic physics, and that the highly technical nature of the writing is a commendable sign that scientists in those fields have pushed far beyond what common sense or casual observation could

achieve – indeed, that that is part of what we understand ‘science’ to mean. But the premise implicit in the recurrent reproach to scholarship in the humanities, by contrast, seems to be that any description of human activity should be readily intelligible to any reasonably well-educated reader, or in other words that the humanities’ subject-matter should entail this requirement of general intelligibility. Actually, there is no good reason to accept this premise: human activity may be made the object of enquiries that are just as technical or statistical or abstract as any other subject-matter, and in these areas as in others the form of expression taken by the results of those enquiries will be determined by professional norms, intended readership, and so on.

These issues are further complicated by the patterns of publishing associated with various disciplines. All working scientists expect to publish the results of their latest research in a number of highly specialized journals (whether print or electronic), journals which no outsider would ever be likely to encounter let alone assume would make agreeable reading. A few of those scientists may also have a gift or inclination for popularization, and they may then write in an utterly different idiom in trying to summarize and communicate the interest of a wide body of research in their field to a ‘general reader’. But the two genres are entirely divorced from each other, and no biologist or physicist or chemist, qua biologist or physicist or chemist, ever builds a successful career except through specialized publishing of the first kind. (There are now a small number of posts devoted to the ‘public understanding’ of science, where work of the second kind may be the appropriate form of professional publishing, but that is separate from the practice of any scientific discipline in itself.) Much the same is now true in several of the social sciences: for example, many economists or social psychologists may only ever publish articles in professional journals. This can be true in certain areas of the humanities: many philosophers publish exclusively in this form, as do some historical demographers and musicologists. But in other fields – especially, say, political and military history, but also literary biography and art history – books are published which aim simultaneously to meet the needs of both specialist and non-specialist readers. A historian of the Second World War, for example, might build a highly respected academic career chiefly on the

basis of publishing books which, though they draw on original research and meet the stiffest requirements of scholarly rigour, can also be given as Christmas presents.

In practice, this avenue is open to very few scholars even among historians, and it is not an option for most academics in other fields, including literary criticism (literary biography is another matter). But the structure of publishing, particularly in the UK, still encourages the idea that a book on a historical or literary topic is somehow defective if it cannot be read with pleasure by an uninstructed reader. Of course, it is not the case that 'specialist' and 'general' readers are two mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories: some works of scholarship may be read by those in adjoining fields, by those in other fields, and occasionally by those who cultivate no scholarly field. And, of course, these categories and boundaries change over time: for a while in the 1950s and 1960s even quite rarefied works of literary criticism enjoyed a considerable *réclame*. And such boundaries are drawn in different ways in different cultures: some works of philosophy or anthropology, for example, can still expect successfully to address *le grand public* in France and several other Latin countries. But for the most part scholarship in the humanities, like work in all other academic disciplines, is principally addressed to fellow-specialists, and quite properly so.

## II

Having begun with these general and somewhat abstract considerations about the humanities disciplines, I now want to look at aspects of professional activity in these fields in a more concrete manner. We may begin with an extremely obvious point about everyday practice in the life of a scholar in the humanities: at every level we are called upon to make judgements of quality, judgements whose grounds remain for the most part beyond conclusive demonstration. That is to say, we are constantly in the business of trying to distinguish outstanding from merely good work and good work from the mediocre or unacceptable. This is as true of us in our roles as markers and

examiners of students' work at all levels as it is of us in our roles as members of appointments and promotions committees, as referees for publication, as reviewers for journals, and as fellow-scholars in our response to and use of work published in our field. And to say that our judgements in these cases are for the most part beyond conclusive demonstration does not, of course, mean that reasons cannot be given and evidence cited to support them: the judgements are, when we are acting up to our own best standards in these matters, far from arbitrary or mere expressions of prejudice. But it means that their rightness cannot be conclusively demonstrated to one who disagrees: we can, ultimately, only say 'Look at this or that or the other aspect – *that* is why it's better, don't you see?', and although the discussion may continue and we may try fresh tactics of persuasion, if the other person does not see, does not recognize the qualities in question, then no amount of pointing can force them to do so.

In any given situation, we may of course value one piece of work over another for various pragmatic or instrumental purposes, including those that have led us to be reading it in the first place. Often we are simply in search of information. However, in addition to such purposes, when we read a piece of writing in the humanities, our judgement is very considerably shaped by a dimension of its writing which is not in any straightforward sense to do with what might be called its informational or propositional content, but rather with matters of perspective, of tone, of nuance, of apparent authority, and so on. More specifically still, what we admire and respond to in the best work are certain qualities of noticing and characterizing, certain powers of illuminating and persuading. This can involve merely drawing attention to things previously overlooked or unrecognized, but more often the way in which the noticing or recognizing is expressed, the texture of the characterizing, conveys to the reader something of the flexibility of intelligence or responsiveness of sensibility at work. The angle of entry to the topic, the distribution of emphasis, the implicit placing or comparison, the specific touches by which a world, an episode, a figure, or a book is conjured up and given density or inwardness – all these things convey to us something of the depth of understanding which is present and is, as it were, underwriting any particular statement. This

depth of understanding may sometimes be expressed in terms of the overt redirection of our attention it commands; at other times it may seem to depend upon little more than the choice of adverbs by which the description of a person or an action is modified. The forms of expression and kinds of judgement involved are necessarily continuous with, albeit more exact and thoroughly grounded than, those involved in everyday human transactions.

I am not drawing attention to this state of affairs in order either to bewail it or to glory in it. But the undeniable fact of it may help us identify something characteristic of, and perhaps even distinctive about, the humanities. Let me enter two immediate caveats. First, it is of course the case that many things are going on at once in a good piece of scholarly or critical writing, and I am not disputing the significance of the other things. Such work may, for instance, involve drawing upon new knowledge in the narrowest sense (perhaps new manuscript sources or hitherto neglected documents and so on); and nothing I say here is meant to diminish the importance of the basic canons of all intellectual enquiry, such as clarity, exactness, rigour of argument, and so on – those are, it should go without saying, indispensable. There is also the question of an appropriate degree of familiarity with the current state of scholarship in relationship to a particular topic: even the most original scholars do not start from scratch, and the kind of contribution a piece of work makes obviously partly depends on the current state of scholarship on that topic. All of these matters are vital – but they are also, I would suggest, shared by most other forms of intellectual enquiry; they are not in any way distinctive of the humanities.

And that leads to my second caveat. Those working in the natural sciences are also constantly distinguishing good from less good work in their own fields, but, as far as I can tell, attention is focused far more exclusively on the demonstrable validity or otherwise of the work's main contentions, plus concerns about the fruitfulness of the topic and fertility of the methods, rather than on these more elusive matters of tone and perspective. Individual scientists may come to be admired for their creativity or originality, but the meaning and value of their scientific papers does not depend upon the kind of texture of expression

I am pointing to here. In principle, one scientific author could be substituted for another without damaging the truth and importance of the findings the article in question is reporting. The same might be said of some aspects of scholarship in the humanities, but in general the overall cogency of a substantial piece of work seems more closely bound up with the individual voice of its author. This is, interestingly, even true of those critiques which challenge the traditional centrality of 'the human subject': the persuasiveness of any such piece of writing will depend in part upon some highly individual characteristics of the critic's cast of mind and literary skill.

In drawing attention to this aspect of the everyday practice of scholarship in the humanities, it is not the business of ranking one student or scholar as in some sense 'better' than another that is significant, but rather the evidence which reflection on our own experience yields us about the nature of the intellectual activity itself. Such reflection suggests a further implication which may be particularly in need of explicit statement at present: it is simply not true that one can only recognize a piece of work as good of its kind if one happens to agree with its approach or, as we are encouraged to say these days, endorses its methodology. We are all, I suspect, familiar with the opposite experience – namely, recognizing real intellectual quality even though we may not share the approach – and part of the significance of that experience lies in the realization that any particular methodology or theoretical vocabulary only furnishes a set of tools or, at most, a set of lenses; it still takes particular users to make use of them, and they can be made use of more or less skilfully.

For these reasons, the activity of 'characterizing' that is at the heart of such work requires that we become as dexterous as possible in deploying, and in reflecting upon our deployment of, the widest possible range of overlapping vocabularies. An unfortunate effect of much of the recent theoretical self-consciousness in academic disciplines has been to encourage the assumption that any scholar or critic is always working from within a *single* theory or paradigm: one has a favoured approach or methodology, an allegiance to one particular ism, and this, it is claimed, governs the kind of work that can be done. But intellectual practice is not actually like that: focusing on what is conveyed

by one manner of expression rather than another draws attention to the fact that such a manner is always under-determined by the particular theoretical model to which allegiance is overtly given. The vocabularies we use in the humanities are in this sense inevitably 'impure': they are amalgams of idioms drawn from more than one intellectual source and from many aspects of everyday expression not explicitly derived from or grounded in any particular theory (which is not to say that they do not rest on or embody assumptions). I am not suggesting here that it is a mark of quality in the humanities to go in for a showy light-footedness or deliberate intellectual magpie-ism, which parades how it has married elements from diverse, and sometimes radically incompatible, sources. I mean, rather, the sense which a piece of writing can give us that, whatever sources of intellectual nourishment have been drawn upon, the results have been digested, absorbed; that there is a controlling understanding which is not reducible to the methodological protocols that have been explicitly announced.

To put it another way, no methodology in the humanities can furnish us with a lexicon and a syntax sufficiently extensive to replace *all* traces of everyday language and idiom. Even the most rebarbative theoretically explicit jargons are shot through with, and embedded in, wider pre-existing vocabularies. The deftness with which this necessary embedding is carried out, the sense of grasp and proportion with which someone makes use of, rather than being made use of by, the terms of a particular approach – these are among the most telling indications of the contrasts between deeper and shallower forms of understanding.

## III

One reason for trying to isolate this aspect of the everyday experience of reading work in the humanities is that it seems to offer a way of thinking about not just the distinctiveness but also the value of such work. For, phrases such as 'the quality of noticing and characterizing' or 'the sense of grasp and proportion' refer not to some form of

impersonal and inert knowledge, but to the human activity of understanding. Putting it in this way immediately signals a difference of emphasis from the prevailing form of the public discussion of these disciplines. The official language available in the public domain for characterizing the nature of work in the humanities at present often seems to reduce to the formula: 'skills + information = knowledge'. If that were really an adequate formula, then the model of good work would have to be something like the encyclopedia entry. Such compilations have their merits and their uses, and they do indeed call upon important skills – the ability to be both clear and concise, to give an orderly exposition of a complex topic, and so on. But compared to a brilliantly imaginative piece of historical reconstruction or an illuminatingly perceptive piece of criticism, the encyclopedia entry is for the most part flat and inert, a mere vehicle, not an actual journey. It tends precisely to be a summary of collective knowledge, not an expression of individual understanding. And it tends to use adverbs very sparsely indeed, including adverbs such as 'sparsely'.

If we have to use formulae – and it is a predictable part of my case that something has gone wrong if we do find ourselves conducting the discussion in terms of formulae – then it would surely be something more like: 'experience + reflection = understanding'. It is vital, as I suggested earlier, to emphasize that the goal of work in the humanities, in particular, is better described as 'understanding' than as 'knowledge'. One of the consequences of insisting on that distinction is the recognition that whereas knowledge is seen as in some sense objective, 'out there', a pile or hoard that exists whether anyone is tending it or not and which any suitably energetic person can climb to the top of, understanding is a human activity that depends in part upon the qualities of the understander.

Several things follow from this. One, which has practical consequences for our notions of assessment, is that the prevailing conception of 'research', understood as the discovery of new knowledge, cannot be applied in these disciplines as readily as in the natural and social sciences. I have tried to make this case more than once before (see the essay 'Against Prodspeak: "Research" in the Humanities', in my *English Past(s)*) and shall not rehearse it again here, but it has another

implication which bears upon the present theme: namely, that whereas in the sciences it seems that the three assessment categories of 'research', 'teaching', and 'public or professional work' can be treated as three quite distinct activities, this is much less true in the humanities. To a working scientist, there is an obvious and readily identifiable distinction between discovering new knowledge and communicating old knowledge. Research is the former, teaching or writing for a lay public are essentially the latter, and one can therefore see a certain brusque administrative logic in attempting to assess and fund these activities in different ways. But that framework serves the humanities much less well. If I write an essay for a scholarly collection on a topic where I have been reading a good deal in what we sometimes call the primary texts, and then I give a lecture to a non-specialist but still highly educated and sophisticated audience about some aspect of this same topic, and then I write a review-essay for, say, the *Times Literary Supplement* discussing some recent publications in this field, and finally I prepare a third-year undergraduate class on one of the primary texts – in this continuum of my activities as a scholar it is much less clear where 'research' begins and ends. I know that my own thinking and writing have been at least as deeply influenced by certain brilliant review-essays I have read in such publications as the *London Review of Books* or the *New York Review of Books* as they have by reading items which assessment procedures more easily recognize as 'research publications', and the same is true for many colleagues. This may tell us something about the nature and importance of the whole spectrum of our scholarly or intellectual activities in their bearing upon that more limited form of writing which is now taken as the exclusive index of 'research'.

A further practical implication of this line of argument is that at all levels the model of assessment in the humanities has to be judgement not measurement, and judgement cannot, without loss and distortion, be rendered in quantitative terms nor can its grounds ever be made wholly 'transparent' (to use another of the current Edspeak buzzwords). This last suggestion can seem particularly unpalatable when viewed from the perspective of those who are judged adversely: the student whose work has been failed, the colleague who has unsuccessfully

applied for promotion, the department which has been ranked lower than it expected in the scramble for funds, and so on. Again, I would emphasize that of course reasons must be given for such judgements, and I am not in the least defending a policy of closed doors or any other procedure that can make it easier for mere prejudice to get its way unchallenged. My point is simply that the process of justifying the judgement inevitably involves an infinite regress: no amount of spelling out of the criteria and laying down of procedures can spirit away the ineliminable element of judgement, and that judgement cannot be made conclusively demonstrable to anyone who does not at least partly recognize the persuasiveness of the more local identifications on which it rests.

It may be better, even at the risk of initial public misunderstanding, to acknowledge that this is a proper reflection of the nature of what is most valuable to us about good work in the humanities rather than trying to pretend otherwise. One of the most satisfying aspects of a crossword puzzle or a chess problem or some elementary arithmetic questions is that you can achieve a kind of closure: you can not only find the one right answer but you can know that you have done so. Very little about work in the humanities is like that. We search for patterns in the carpet, but we are aware that the characterization of any one pattern can never be conclusive. As I have already suggested, everything we say in these subjects is challengeable, not just in the sense in which knowledge in the sciences is challengeable by bringing in new information or revealing flaws in the logic of the original reasoning, but challengeable by bringing to bear another idiom, another context, another emphasis, another perspective, another sensibility. And these are always matters of judgement, albeit of disciplined and experienced judgement rather than merely subjective or arbitrary judgement. The greater persuasiveness of the new account cannot be demonstrated conclusively: it can only attempt to plug itself into our understanding at a greater number of points, to build more plausibility and more illumination into a rearrangement of what is already in some sense partly known.

This means that, as scholars in the humanities, we should not be willing to re-describe what we most value about what we do purely in

terms either of ‘skills’ or of ‘new findings’. Deciding whether or in what way the character of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* is self-deceived may be central to our understanding and estimation of that novel, but it is not a process that can be reduced to the exercise of ‘skills’. Similarly, exploring what it might mean to say that Nietzsche’s critique of morality is flawed by his not wholly ironic self-dramatization – a knotty, disputable, but perhaps profound comment on that brilliant and exasperating writer – cannot very easily be represented as pushing back the frontiers of knowledge by means of ‘research’. It is possible that Thomas Mann already had a deeper grasp of this question a century ago than that displayed in the latest academic monograph on Nietzsche, yet we could hardly say that this just means the ‘research’ has already been ‘done’ and we merely have to look up the ‘results’. It may mean that in brooding on this question a modern scholar will make at least as much progress with the matter as a result of re-reading a bit of Thomas Mann as by mopping up all the recent articles identified in an online literature search, but, as Alexander Nehamas’s marvellous *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* showed some years ago, there can be no recipe for doing good new work on such a topic. Better thinking in the humanities often occurs as a result of a sufficiently thoughtful and responsive re-encounter with the ideas of figures long dead, including figures who did not belong to the same discipline, or indeed to any discipline.

A further consequence of this argument is that the most fertile conditions for stimulating good work in the humanities may have more to do with the range and qualities of the minds an individual scholar engages with and learns from than it does with the concentration of expertise, in its narrow form, in a given sub-field. This, too, has implications for the funding of research, since it seems that in some branches of science and medicine it can make sense to arrange funding so as to concentrate researchers on certain topics exclusively in a very small number of institutions. This comparison again draws attention to the ways in which ‘research’ may be a dangerously misleading model for the humanities. Far from being beneficial, it would be intellectually damaging not just to teaching but also to scholarship in the respective fields were, say, all modern German history PhDs to

be done at Cambridge, or all eighteenth-century English poetry PhDs at Leeds, and so on. Such concentration may reduce rather than enhance the likelihood of stimulating contact, both for scholars in these sub-fields and for the larger scholarly communities from which they are thereby withdrawn. Though there can sometimes be benefits from undertaking collaborative projects, as well as economies of scale in practical terms, it remains true that in the humanities the basic unit of funding has to be the individual, whether established scholar or new graduate student, and it is not wholly predictable where any particular such individual will most flourish.

Although my focus here is not on pedagogical practice, this argument does also have consequences for how we talk about teaching. For example, it suggests that we do better to acknowledge, rather than seek to disguise, the extent to which, beyond a minimum introductory level, education in the humanities largely consists in a form of apprenticeship. At each stage, in the form relevant to that stage, the student is exposed to contact with someone who carries on the trade at a high level, and is thereby encouraged to develop an autonomous capacity for noticing and characterizing. Much of this can undoubtedly be learned, but only to a limited degree can it be taught; there is at least some truth in the old adage that it is more readily caught than taught. In this respect, much teaching in the humanities partakes of the central activity of literary criticism, where the critic points to features of the work in question and says ‘See?’ Of course, what is to be seen, and why it may be important to see it, can be spelled out and justified; but the extent to which the student comes to ‘see’ it for herself will largely depend on the human qualities of expressiveness and subtlety in the teacher and on the responsiveness and curiosity of the student. We should not accept that ‘study skills’, abstracted from learning about a particular topic, can, to any great extent, substitute for this engagement. Introducing students to the study of the humanities is more akin to inciting them to take part in a discussion than it is to equipping them to process information efficiently.

It is important to recognize that all metaphors about ‘joining a discussion’ or being ‘dexterous in one’s deployment of an idiom’ can appear both self-satisfied and coercive to those who, setting out from

quite other linguistic or cultural starting-points, fear that a lack of facility with one peculiar way of going on may simply operate as a means to exclude them. Such reminders are legitimate checks on any tendency we may have to take particular contingent conditions for granted. But it should be clear that my aim in this chapter is not to engage with those reminders in any extended way, but rather to urge us not to be thrown so far on to the defensive by them or by other challenges that we mis-describe what we actually do and actually value. Learning how to understand and characterize human actions and expressions across time and culture does not presuppose the validity of currently favoured starting-points. On the contrary, one of the features that distinguishes some of the most original work in these fields is a persuasive case for the benefits of starting from somewhere else. Discussions can be interrupted and redirected, and a different voice may be particularly effective in disturbing the existing participants into re-examining matters they had come to take for granted.

At present, one particularly favoured self-description in what tend, in this context, to be referred to as 'the human sciences' is the contention that the distinguishing operation in these disciplines is '*critique*'. Critique always aims to challenge the givenness of any starting-point, assumption, or range of reference, and usually to unmask the potentially sinister interests that are served by allowing any such starting-point to go unchallenged. For certain purposes, this can, needless to say, be a wholly fruitful, indeed necessary, strategy to pursue. But at the level of concrete instances, good work, like good talk or any other form of worthwhile human relationship, *depends upon* being able to assume an extended shared world. This is not necessarily sinister or exclusive, nor is it necessarily to be equated, as it too often is in glib forms of ideology-critique, with particular social groups or interests. People can learn about new worlds starting from many different backgrounds. As a result, individuals will frequently turn out to have far more in common as a basis from which to engage in an intellectual exchange about a specific book or episode than the prior statements of their 'methodological position' or 'social identity' might suggest. The model of critique presents itself as insurgent because of its insistence on the social locatedness of all arguments. However, the

effect of this is constantly to move discussion to a transcendental standpoint from which the necessary limits of any particular exchanges can be identified. This has its point in philosophical enquiry, but a too-swift move to a meta-theoretical standpoint tends to obstruct or deaden discussion of the texture of individual instances, and therefore cannot be a prescription for *all* work in the humanities. Similarly, if there is a sense in which we can speak, metaphorically, of individuals talking different 'languages', then the ideal should surely be to facilitate the richest, most nuanced exchange about particular matters, which requires language-learning and translation, not the reduction of these languages into a lowest common denominator or a kind of intellectual equivalent of Esperanto.

Furthermore, insofar as the emphasis on critique does proceed to engage with concrete instances, its tendency towards what has been termed 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' can have a limiting as well as enabling power. In much work done under this inspiration, there is a curious asymmetry in which the assumptions of the figures who are the objects of study are subjected to a much more severe regime than are the assumptions of the ones doing the studying. My recipe would be the opposite: extend the greatest possible imaginative sympathy to the expressions of the human agents we study, but combine it with the greatest possible scepticism about any of the explanatory mechanisms by means of which we try to account for their actions. Depth of understanding involves something which is more than merely a matter of deconstructive alertness; it involves a measure of interpretative charity and at least the beginnings of a wide responsiveness. Since the processes of identification, sympathy, imagination, and so on can suggest an undisciplined subjectivism, some of the severer methodological protocols that have been fashionable in the humanities in recent decades have sought to outlaw them. But in reality they are essential to the amplest forms of understanding, whether in scholarly work or other aspects of human experience. If we were to treat all our interlocutors' utterances merely as symptomatic rather than as expressive or communicative, we would soon find ourselves leading affectively thin and relentlessly diagnostic lives. It is true that the critic or historian does not, and should not, take at face value all statements by the

individuals they are studying, and it is also true that scholars may sometimes bring to the interpretation of such statements concepts which the agents themselves did not possess. But understanding them as human expressions, with meanings that belonged to a world that is not identical to our world, is the indispensable starting-point, and that requires a form of human sympathy at least as much as it does narrow-eyed suspicion. Without an element of such interpretive charity, there will always be a considerable misdirection of forensic energy if we confine ourselves to attempting to secure a conviction against such utterances on the grounds of the unacceptable attitudes they inadvertently betray or disclose.

## IV

In conclusion, a brief comment on the question of justification or defence, beginning with a very general point already touched on, namely that justification involves some kind of appeal to shared values. Alert practical critics will notice that in this book I make liberal use of such adverbs as 'surely': that is one of the rhetorical markers precisely of this kind of appeal to pre-existing, if not always articulated, common experience (as is the use, also deliberately prominent, of the first-person plural). The core of the argument here is simply stated. A society in which individuals never attempted to identify and refine their experiences of other individuals in whom they partly recognized themselves would also be one which could never be persuaded of the point of studying the humanities. In practice, the persuasiveness of argument will always depend upon this prior potential for recognition. But recognition grows out of particulars: it cannot be lodged in the mind by concepts alone.

Thus, there will be situations in which the best tactic for defending the humanities in the face of real or simulated scepticism may be to say: 'See, this is what we do: terrific, isn't it?' If the response from the sober-suited self-styled administrative realists around the table is to say that they don't see that it's terrific at all, it may, paradoxically, be better to let the discussion degenerate into a version of the pantomime

exchange 'Oh yes it is/Oh no it isn't', rather than to try to re-describe the value of the activity in terms drawn from a different, instrumental world of discourse. In practice, of course, discussion will not tend to follow this pattern, at least not in its pure form, but imagining the logic of such an exchange can be a helpful heuristic, a way of reminding ourselves what realities, in terms of concrete achievement, lie behind the familiar appeal to bland abstractions. And while speaking of particulars, we should register the subliminal capacity of the phrase 'concrete achievement' to summon up disconcertingly apt images: there is something both pleasing and telling about the fantasy of responding to official requests to 'justify' the humanities by having a series of dumper trucks deposit a huge pile of excellent scholarly books on the steps of the relevant ministry.

Put more soberly, the point here is that the effectiveness of any response that we can make when faced with a (potentially unsympathetic) request to characterize and justify the humanities may be as much a matter of tone and confidence as it is of definitions and arguments. The humanities, it has been well said, 'explore what it means to be human: the words, ideas, narratives and the art and artefacts that help us make sense of our lives and the world we live in; how we have created it and are created by it'. The forms of enquiry grouped together under this label are ways of encountering the record of human activity in its greatest richness and diversity. To attempt to deepen our understanding of this or that aspect of that activity is an intelligible and purposeful expression of disciplined human curiosity and is – insofar as the phrase makes any sense in this context – an end in itself. It should be clear that I intend these deliberately intransigent remarks to be the opposite of a counsel of despair. Very little that is of any interest or significance in our lives is like a crossword puzzle or a chess problem. The kinds of understanding and judgement exercised in the humanities are of a piece with the kinds of understanding and judgement involved in living a life. All we can say at this point is that *that*, in the end, is why they interest us and seem worthwhile, and we must then recognize that we have reached a point beyond which justification cannot go. In trying to 'justify' the humanities, as in trying to live a life, what may turn out to matter most is holding one's nerve.