Bunker Memorial Lectures

Reflections on the Humanities in a Democratic Culture

John Walter Bicknell

REFLECTIONS ON THE HUMANITIES IN A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

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PREFACE

The Bunker Memorial Lectures were inaugurated in 1969 to commemorate the work and interests of the Rev. Dr. Sydney K. Bunker who was the Head of Jaffna College for nearly thirty years. Four well-known scholars have delivered the Memorial Lectures since the inauguration of the series— Dr. K. G. Saiyidain, an eminent Indian educationist; the Rev. Father Xavier S. Thani Nayagam, an internationally recognised scholar in the field of Tamil Studies; Professor Malcolm S. Adisesiah, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Madras, Dr. Sinnappah Arasaratnam, Professor and Chairman of the Department of History, University of New England, Australia.

Professor John Walter Bicknell who delivers the lecture this year is one very intimately associated with Jaffna College being the son of the late Rev. John Bicknell, former Principal of Jaffna College. Prof. Bicknell graduated from Hamilton College, and obtained his Masters Degree from Hamilton College and Columbia University and his Ph. D. from Cornell University. He taught at St. Lawrence University, Cornell University, and Drew University, where he was professor of English from 1957 to 1978. He is now Professor emeritus and is continuing his research in his field of interests residing in Maine, U. S. A.

Besides being an experienced professor of English, Prof. Bicknell has many publications to his credit and has taken an active part in administrative responsibilities on the University campus. He is also a member of several professional associations and is deeply involved in the educational enterprise.

INTRODUCTION

We at Jaffna College present to you again another Bunker Memorial Lecture. Sydney Bunker was a pastor, scholar, missionary, theologian, administrator and a great lover of nature. His thirty years here were known for its charismatic, cultured, quiet, dignified and scholarly influence. "That benign and kindly light" created in the college an atmosphere and presence that emanated only love and compassion and we who were privileged to grow up in that atmosphere and influence never heard the word discipline mentioned or flaunted about, nor discipline enforced to the detriment of the human personality. Dr. Bunker came as an adminstrator into a period when the impressive age of the great Headmsters was over, their prototype being that of Arnold of Rugby of "Tom Brown's school days".

A new and fresh age of expression was taking over and the flowering of the human spirit in new forms was evident and encouraged, where no one was constrained to a single mould or stamp—but each one a unique individual developing in his own sweet inimitable way. We at Jaffna College relished that freedom of spirit and revelled in it. We had no uniforms, no uniformity of appearance, ideas or expressions and we debated out pet views and ideas in our academics, literary associations, journals, Miscellanies and "Young Ideas". It was a beautiful, fragrant and exhilarating atmosphere, and it was a cultured, dignified and easy transition from missionary to national leadership in the College while in the country in general it was a transition from colonialism to nationalism.

Dr. Bunker was one who whole-heartedly fitted into this transition magnificiently, so much so, that it was only a Bunker who could have succeeded a Bicknell so smoothly in this new era of changes.

We are therefore, indeed fortunate to witness the relevant and happy coincidence of having a Bicknell to deliver the Bunker Memorial Lecture, and he is the first American to do so and I am sure it will be a great source of joy to Mrs. Ruth Bunker and her daughters, Charlotte and Grace to know that.

I need not introduce our learned lecturer to this audience. His credentials are already included in the preface and I need only to say how much he has endeared himself to us, and the humble Vaddukoddai farmer and villager proclaim him as a true manifestation in our midst of "Bicknell Iyer of old".

We could write a graphic and moving chapter in our history of this very loveable visit of the Bicknells to us. We only hope that they could come with their children and grand children and enjoy Jaffna again. They belong to that very rare band of peculiar people who can really enjoy Jaffna, its palmyrah trees, its beaches. the sun-rise and sun-set, the vegetables and fruits, the fish, crabs and prawns, its pullikanchchi, pinattu, pachchadi and payasam — luxuries we Jaffna people have long forgotten but which the Bicknells enjoy with great delight. They have helped us to love our own country and view it with new bright, devoted and affectionate eyes.

I do not want to impinge on the lecturer's topic this evening. Some of you have already had a preview of it in the Prize-Day Address. We in the field of education, even in our schools feel everyday the sad and tragic exit of the Humanities from the curriculum. It has crippled our educational tone and stature beyond recognition and drastically lowered the quality of life in our country in every sphere, and therefore, we welcome the learned lecturer's reflections on the humanities very much today.

A. Kadirgamar
Principal,
Jaffna College.

Vaddukoddai.
15-5-1983.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

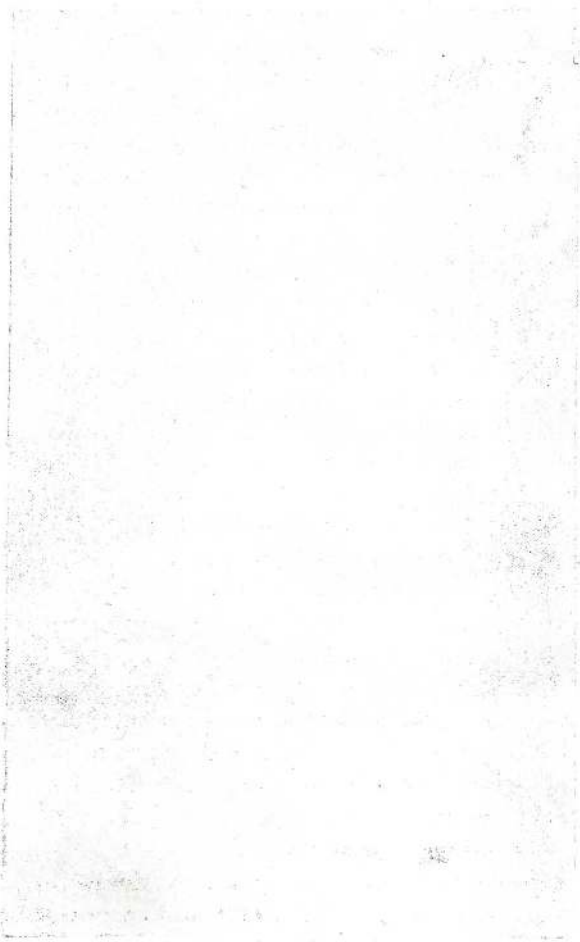
The first time I saw Mr. Bunker was in the spring of 1937 when he came to New York before he and his wife sailed for Ceylon to take up their posts at Jaffna College. We took to each other at once; then lost track, but re-established contact when my mother died in 1958 and he kindly undertook to conduct the ceremony of interring her ashes in the Uduvil cemetery. We then began a regular annual correspondence in which we discussed events in Jaffna and the rest of Sri Lanka until he came home to retire. We found we had congenial minds and that we interpreted history in somewhat the same manner, but before we could turn our correspondence into conversation, he was taken from us. In part, it was his known devotion to the Humanities that led me to my topic, but I soon found out that the very first Bunker Lecture, given by the notable K. G. Saiyidain, was also on this theme, entitled *The Crisis in Modern Society*. I feel, therefore, that what follows stands in the tradition of these lectures and I trust that, though I do not hope to rival my predecessors, what I have to say will at least be valued as a foot note to what has gone before, and in some way justify the great honour Jaffna College has given me in asking me to contribute to this series.

J. W. Bicknell

Rev. Dr. SYDNEY K. BUNKER

Bunker Memorial Lecture 1983

Prof. JOHN WALTER BICKNELL



Reflections on the Role of the Humanities in a Democratic Culture

I have called this lecture "Reflections" for it will not be based on extensive data, statistics, or other scholarly apparatus, but primarily upon my experience as a teacher and upon convictions developed over years of observation and study. By the Humanities I mean all those subjects such as literature, languages, philosophy, history, and the fine arts usually so classified, though I recognize, and would applaud, any attempt to put all university subjects under the heading of the liberal arts. I accept the current definition, however, for it is convenient and apt for the situation confronting the Humanities in contemporary society, Sri Lankan or American.

And what is that situation? It has two aspects. First, the Humanities suffer from neglect by those industrious and worthy members of our society who deem them useless. The Humanities grow no rice and oil no curry. They are amiable luxuries, to be cut from the budget in favour of such "essentials" as mathematics, sciences (hard and soft), business administration, and related subjects, not to mention computer science. Students and parents see the economic future only in terms of the technical subjects or certain professions in which the humanities are deemed of secondary or negligible importance. Second, they are under attack from presumably democratic clusters of opinion as being elitist. Their charge is that the history or philosophy or literature is the history of ruling class or caste culture and to study it is merely to reinforce reactionary values: Milton's views of women are deplorable, Shakespeare's *Henry V* is an imperialistic epic; the famous scene in the Bhagavad Gita in which Krishna advises Arjuna to fight on is an example of religion encouraging violence and civil war in the interests of some presumed God's will; the *Tirrukurral* is full of advice to monarchs and kings, and what have we to do with them?

History itself is of the doings of Kings and soldiers as in the *Mahawansa;* besides that is all in the past. Philosophy is a useless study for it sets our minds on unsolvable metaphysical problems instead of dealing with the solvable social problems in front of us. There is also, perhaps, a third prong of the attack that comes from the side of autocracy, namely, that it is safer to keep students away from subjects and methods/ that encourage them to ask why; from the point of view of a democratic culture, however, the attack itself proves the value of the humanities, so we need not trouble ourselves with it in any detail.

How do we deal with the other two basic charges? Shall we go about with a begging bowl in ragged clothes and make apologetic and pleading noises to those who dispense the funds for education, lower and higher? Shall we say yes, we know the Humanities are not really important but they do add glamour and polish to a technical education; besides, many of us will lose our jobs if you don't support us and you will have to put out welfare funds for us anyway. To this I say no, no, and again no! Let us not be defensive or apologetic; let us take the offensive, especially with those who argue the uselessness of the Humanities. Let them demonstrate the social usefulness of a purely technical or vocational education. Of what use is it to have a technical education if it leads one to the statement made by a Western technocrat that he hoped to see the day when not a single water buffalo was left in Sri Lanka. Any farmer knows better than that. The argument is about as strong as the one described by Lincoln as being "like a soup brewed from the shadow of a pigeon that had starved to death." As if the ability to think through a problem and reach a sensible conclusion were useless, as if an understanding of an historical situation could be of no use in solving a contemporary problem as if one could not learn something about jealousy by reading *Othello,* as if the expansion of spirit that comes from experiencing a great work of musical or plastic art were useless, as if one's moral imagination, one's ability to step into another's shoe's were useless! Really, one gasps at the emptiness of the argument. We have only to turn to one of the great texts on the subject to find ourselves in a different order of thought and existence; I speak of this passage from Percy B. Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*:

> The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination;..... it strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man.

By poetry, it is clear from the context, Shelley means any artistic production (i. e., any work of the imagination). He was writing in a time of troubles like our own, and, as a radical democrat, he was asserting the importance of the creative imagination to democratic culture. He knew that a democratic culture is something more than a mere form of government or a constitution; it is a way in which people live together. It takes a sympathetic imagination to help us behave with love and consideration for others, not just for our family, or our social group, but for those outside the inner circle, for those of every rank, caste, or religion. In an autocracy one can rule by force or fraud; for a time perhaps one can dispense with sympathy, though, of course, we know that those regimes that have dispensed with it have finally crumbled or been violently destroyed. For a democratic culture however, the cultivation of the feelings is essential. Perhaps we need not love all our neighbours, but we do need to understand them, respect them, and be sensitive to their rights as human beings.

How the lack of these qualities can undermine a democratic way of life we can see by considering what happened to the UNITED NATIONS when it moved from Flushing Meadow, Long Island to its new structure in Manhattan. The original was a single floored building with many corridors leading from the extremities to the centre; as a result, the UN workers and delegations constantly met each other in the corridors and on an equal level. Now, the UN is housed unimaginatively in

a typical New York skyscraper, a match box on end, with the highest members of the secretariat at the top and the so-called lowest at the bottom. The whole building contradicts the idea of the organization it is supposed to house. Likewise, in the United States government, an employee gets a room and a desk, the size of which is determined by his/her precise scaling on the civil service heirarchy, not by the nature of the task he performs. Contrast this with the position of the office of the Headmaster of Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts; it was in the hall in middle of the building, wide open, where the "Head" could see all the students as they trooped by between classes" and where they could see him, and if they liked, speak to him, or he to them. I am sure you can supply your own examples from your own society of the failures and successes in shaping institutional structures to the needs of a democratic culture.

And what has this to do with the Humanities? Have they not always been the province of the elite? True those who had or have the leisure to practice and study the Humanities often wear them as a badge of superiority; they look down their noses at the common people, at middle-class business men and women, at the so-called ignorant masses. This misuse of the Humanities throughout European and American and, I suspect, Indian society as well needs no demonstration. The achievement of culture by the privileged few has been obtained off the backs of toiling men and women, and it is no wonder that sometimes the latter have resented the fact and attacked culture both in word and deed.

It was Gandhi himself who refused to admire the Taj Mahal because it was built by slave labour, and he too who regarded higher education with suspicion, especially for women. After all people say, great literature is of and about members of a higher class; philosophy is a subject remote from ordinary people and too many philosophers think like Plato, whose *Republic* is a Spartan dictatorship run by philosophers instead of the military. Moreover, the history one studies is written by those who were victorious and says very little about the fate or the life of the common people.

How do we answer these charges? There are, I think, three ways of dealing with them. My first approach will be to accept the charge, but to challenge the assumption that because a work of art or literature or philosophy has been composed by a member of a ruling group it necessarily has no value whatever for a democratic culture. My second answer will be to assert that both in ancient and modern history the Humanities have served a democratic culture. My third answer will try to suggest the ways in which the situation in the Humanities is changing; the content of materials for teaching them is expanding enormously.

To take up my first position in more detail, are we to assume that no member of a ruling group can ever see anything truly, or express any sympathy for the rest of humanity, or endorse values that might be treasured in a democratic society, or even be able to transcend the values of his or her own class? The question has only to be asked in this rough-hewn way for us to realize the emptiness of the assumption. If an aristocratic culture decides that honesty is a useful virtue, that hardly disqualifies it as a virtue useful to a democratic culture. I need not labour the obvious. What I would prefer to dwell on are those moments when a great writer of the past has transcended the values of his class and opened the eyes of his readers to a new dimension of being. I shall begin with Homer, whose *Iliad* was to the Athenian democracy what the *Mahabharata* has been to India.

In the first place let me say that the *Iliad* has been taken by many to be a magnificently written epic celebrating the values of honour, glory in battle, noble ancestry, and the other assorted virtues associated with a military aristocracy. No one would quarrel with such a statement except to say that, that is not the whole story. In the first place, Homer tells the truth about war and battlefields and violence; about cruelty and trickery; about egotistical pride and vindictiveness. The *Iliad* is a world of victory and triumph, but also a world of violent death and ugly wounds and grief; and unforgetably a world which is looked down upon by the Gods as one in which any victory is ephemeral and illusory, for the life of

a man on earth is but a moment in the eternal drift of time. Poseidon, the god of the sea becomes vexed because the Achaeans are building a seawall; he complains to Zeus, who calmly answers; Why do you concern yourself? You know that in a few months or years you will have washed away the wall and no sign of it will be left. The Ionian aristocrats lounging on their couches and sipping their after dinner wine, while they listened to Homer strike his harp and sing his hexameters could well have been flattered by what he had to tell them of their glorious past, but they could hardly have been confident that military glory was anything permanent or that the battle field was some romantic setting for their private triumphs. But the most profoundly moving scene in the *Iliad* comes near the end, after Achilles has killed Hector, and has much to the disgust of the Gods, dragged Hector's body around the wall of Troy a dozen times or so, as he works off his private grief and guilty over the death of his friend, Patroclus. He refuses to surrender Hector's body to the Trojans for decent burial, and so that magnificent old man Priam (he is the king of course, but in this scene he is primarily a father), decides to go out of Troy to Achilles' tent and ask for the body. He gets a cart, pushes away the sons who try to restrain him, and sets out. He comes to the tent, afraid that Achilles may kill him too, but he kneels down before the warrior and begs for his son's body. He takes Achilles' hands in his own and kisses them, and as he asks for the body of Hector he says, "I have kissed the hands of the man who has slain my son." Achilles is touched. He remembers his own father at home in Greece, and he speaks movingly of how here he is harrassing the Trojans, risking his own life in the search for honour, and how futile it all is. He is extremely tactful; he will not let Priam see Hector's body yet, lest Priam burst out in some angry violence against Achilles, and he will have to kill Priam. He brings out food and drink; they break bread together; he gives up the body of Hector and they part in peace. This moment of decency and kindness and even forgiveness between enemies is a sudden illumination, luminous in itself and in contrast to the whole bloody business of the war. It is a moment of transcendence. The dialogue between Athens and Jerusalem has begun. True, after the twelve days of truce,

the battle resumes; Homer is too realistic to give us a sentimental conclusion; moments of charity and humanity occur in all wars, but the wars go on.

Let us turn to that other classical epic, Virgil's *Aeneid*, written to celebrate the founding of Rome and by implication, the achievement of Augustus Caesar in unifying and consolidating the Empire. Virgil does his duty, but he can hardly conceal his sympathy for the victims of the imperial urge and the human cost of such large and often impersonal enterprises. As Aeneas and his band of followers struggle out of burning Troy and across the sea, they come to Carthage and stop there for a time; Aeneas tells the queen of their adventures and they fall in love, he a widower, Dido a widow with one son. They make love with the aid of Venus, and Dido conceives. Zeus will have none of this. Rome must be founded and if Aeneas stays in Carthage his destiny will be unfulfilled. Zeus gives the orders and Aeneas dutifully says farewell to Dido, who, as she sees the ship sail off, commits suicide on the burning pyre. She is no strumpet to be cast aside; she is a queen, a woman of dignity, who has been abandoned by the man she loves. Later, during his descent into the underworld, Aeneas encounters her and tries to speak kindly but she does not reply. She turns proudly away. Thus Virgil affirms her value and lets Aeneas pass on in embarrassed silence. In the final section of the epic Aeneas tries to establish his regime over Italy; he conquers some Latin tribes and makes peace with others. Some leaders, the older ones like Latinus, are ready for peaceful coexistence, but Turnus, the young chieftain, will have none of this; he will fight to the death if necessary, and of course he does. But that final fight between Aeneas and Turnus is most extraordinary, especially for an epic written to celebrate the success of the hero. What happens? When Aeneas sees on Turnus' arm the brooch Turnus seized from the body of Aeneas' friend, Aeneas sees red, and kills Turnus brutally. Turnus dies and the last line of the poem says nothing about the hero's victory or his glory; it reads, "the soul of Turnus ascended, wailing, to the sky." Once again Virgil has enlisted our sympathy for the victim, not the victor; no trumpets blare out the imperial triumph; instead, a violin plays a fragmentary elegy for the soul of the defeated.

Then there is the rich heritage of classical drama produced by the four great Athenian dramatists of the 5th century. One hardly knows where to begin or what play to choose. Despite the fact that Athenian culture was established on slavery, yet it was a democratic culture. When the Parthenon was built every citizen contributed a piece of marble from Pentelicus to build it; of course, some contributed more than others. The whole city partook of the festivals of Dionysos in which the dramas of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides and Aristophanes were the centre pieces. The citizens brought their lunches to the theatre and ate them while the stylized figures in masks and high boots spoke their lines, and the chorus danced and sang. There the audience could see Antigone defying the tyrant; the Trojan women of Euripides suffering in exile and servitude; and the long agony of the house of Atreus caught in the midst of a family feud that is only broken when Apollo and Athena establish a court of law. In this trilogy, Aeschylus is teaching his fellow Athenians that a government of law must succeed a violent and anarchic government of men and women, giving them a vivid piece of painful and poignant instruction that most of the nations of the world today might ponder with some profit. The United Nations could do worse than to sponsor a performance of this great dramatic sequence and invite assorted heads of state, including Begin and Reagan, Arafat and Andropov among other names that will occur to anyone immediately. Now that we have the facilities of television these classics can be performed, not only for heads of state but for every one who can get near a set. For, like the film and before that the radio, television has an enormous potential for enlarging the role of the humanities in any democratic culture.

I have given a few examples from the world of classical literature and could exhaust your patience by reciting the titles from the canon of English and European literature which when read or encountered throughout a lifetime, in schoolroom, to living room or theatre, can give us a vivid sense of what it feels like, for example, to try to reform a corrupt and murderous society (*Hamlet*) what it feels like to be a persecuted human being, so persecuted as to be driven to revenge (Shylock), what happens to a social order when its, leaders abdicate respons-

sibility and mistake words for deeds (*King Lear*), or what is the cost, both to the individual and to society of executing a prophet (Shaw's *St Joan*). The fact is that the task is not to find literary works that can nourish the moral imagination but to choose among them. One could also point to some of the great classics in philosophy and religion and ethics, but their names are so famous and so obvious that they hardly need reiteration. I pass them by because I want to lay more stress on the Fine Arts (which seem to me to be neglected in Sri Lanka).

Probably one of the most remarkable examples of the role of the fine arts in a democratic culture can be found in the work of the Mexican artists in the 1930's and later: I am thinking of the great murals in public buildings all over Mexico painted by Diego Rivera, Jose' Clemente Orozco, Sequeiros, and their followers. These men portrayed the rhythms, colours, and lines of Aztec and Toltec peasants (the descendants of the people of Montezuma); the corrupt and brutal behaviour of their oppressors; the activities of their revolutionary leaders; the men and women in factories. These artists gave the people back their own history and their own lives in colour and line and sweep. And what was the inspiration of these artists? Not the decayed Spanish colonial and corrupt Baroque, art, but the mural painters of Florence, Italy, and the medieval European painters who covered the walls of churches and public buildings with stories from sacred and secular history. The Mexican artists said, here is a democratic art form; it is something everybody can see, not something hidden away in a museum. And so they went to work. That Mexican democracy has since decayed, and the peasantry and working class still not fully emancipated takes nothing away from that great achievement: the murals are still there to inspire the people and rebuke their rulers, who, I think, would not dare to take them down. One can find a parallel in what happened in the United States in the 1930's when during the great depression, the government instituted the Works Progress Administration Art Project. Unemployed artists were commissioned to paint murals in Post Offices and other government buildings in the major cities and some minor ones. These artists, many of them young at the time and now famous, went to work and, like their colleagues

across the boarder, painted the tales of the region or scenes from the characteristic life of the ordinary people, not merely the famous. I doubt if any of these works can rival in artistic power the work of the Mexican muralists, but nevertheless, they gave the people something to look at besides sentimental versions of second-rate English landscape painting. Some of them portrayed the boisterous country dances as well as the Sunday church service, the bringing in of the hay while the dark cloud over, threatened lightning and thunder as well as the setting up of a first schoolhouse on the prairie, or a barn raising. These, too, no doubt raised the democratic consciousness amongst the people and did for them in paint what Walt Whitman's poems had done in verse. It was an artistic endeavour he would have approved and applauded.

I have now illustrated, adequately I trust, my first two points, namely, that aristocratic art can have meaning for a democratic culture, and that the Humanities in the form of the fine arts can consciously serve a democratic culture. My third point was that the materials for teaching and studying the Humanities have now expanded so much that the history of culture, even of aristocratic or tyrannous culture, can be made to serve the ethos of democracy. I shall focus my attention on history, but before looking at that discipline let us observe that we are recovering the art and literature and music of women, long neglected, as well as information on the role of women in history; we are recovering and bringing to light African history, the arts of the so-called primitive, and the literature of the American Indian. In short, the voices of the wretched of the earth, the oppressed or forgotten majorities and minorities are being heard and recorded; and the records that they have left are being turned to account, and the voices of those who cannot or could not write are being put on tape and becoming the raw material of social history.

Sometime in the late nineteenth century a woman in Kansas decided to ask all the women who had come west in the eighteen sixties and seventies to write down their experiences. Her requests were granted and hundreds of women responded. Their documents she kept in a file drawer, but when she died

they were put in the attic and remained there until one day her grand daughter found them. She has now digested and summarized those records and produced a fascinating book called *Pioneer Women in Kansas.* Eugene Genovese, an American Marxist historian, has written anew on slavery in America using materials hitherto unlooked at—old letters, the accounts of those still living, who remember, plantation records of all kinds—and we now have a concrete and vivid understanding of American slavery such as we have never had before. In France a young historian LaDurie, discovered the court records of an inquisitor who tried cases of heresy during the Albigensian crusade; as a result we now have an intimate account of how those people lived and died and what it was like to be a heretic in the south of France in the 12th and 13th centuries. The great master of this French school of historians (Les Annalistes) Ferdinand Brandel, has produced his great work on the Mediterranean, which tells us more of what it was like to live there in ages past, and what problems people had to solve, than all the accounts of kings and queens and generals you ever read. These are only some prime examples of what is going on everywhere among historians. If I were a dictator I would require history at every level of education including the sciences, for the history of science has its importance too. I would be thus dictatorial not only because, as has so often been said, "Those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it," but also because, properly taught, history can stimulate the imagination so that students can enter into the lives and ways of people different from as well as like themselves, and reduce the provinciality of the modern who looks down on the past with what someone called "the awful condescension of posterity". For people in Sri-Lanka and Jaffna in particular, the study of dual cultures living in more or less limited geographical areas might suggest roads to reconciliation as well as the roads that lead to conflict or separation; an analytic history of terrorism as compared to other forms of resistance to oppression might be helpful for those now engaged in a great debate about how to deal with what seems to be an unyielding government. Why did the Castro revolution succeed in Cuba and the Guevara movement in Bolivia fail? Mention of those two names reminds us that biography

is an important aspect of history, and here, too, we are experiencing a great expansion of publication and documentation of all sorts of people, of publications which show us the intimate connection between individuals and large historical forces, and at the same time give us glimpses of men and women whose names should have been in the history books long ago, people who fought or strove for human rights, among them women of courage, intelligence, and energy; unlettered and unlearned persons who tried to establish patterns of social organization which would foster kindness and decency among its citizens. And while the new history, as we may call it, excites the imagination and stirs our curiosity, the old history has its uses as well. You will forgive me if I return to the Greeks once more and suggest that a reading or a rereading of Thucydides on the war between Sparta and Athens could be an instructive exercise in this age of big power rivalry and small-power bloody wars. I assure you the instruction will not be cheering, for what you will see is that the human race has learned nothing in the following centuries; we have merely improved the technology of mass murder. The only hope might be that those who study the old Greek historian (he was a general in the Athenian army, by the way) will learn again the age-old lesson that all swords are two-edged; that fear breeds war; that fear is a bad basis for national policy, or as Franklin D. Roosevelt told his people and the world fifty years ago, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

This famous saying brings me back where I began, to Shelley's defense of the imagination, or Poetry as he calls it. As he begins to draw to a close his impassioned argument, he summarizes the human situation in Europe in 1821 in a way that will be all too familiar to us in 1983.

> We have more moral, political, and historical wisdom than we know how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these systems of thought is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy, or at least, what is wiser and better than what men now practise and endure. But we let

> "I *dare not* wait upon *I would*, like the poor cat in the adage." We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act what we imagine; we want the poetry of life; our calculations have out run our conception; we have eaten more than we can digest.

Are you sure, you are probably asking me, that these words were written in 1821? Yes, I'm sure, and here are more:

> The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements remains himself a slave. To what būt a cultivation of the mechanical arts in a degree disproportioned to the presence of the creative faculty, which is the basis of all knowledge, is to be attributed the abuse of all invention for abridging and combining labour, to the exasperation of the inequality of mankind. From what other cause has it arisen that the discoveries that should have lightened have added a weight to the curse imposed on Adam? Thus poetry and the principle of self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of the world.

Well, you will rightly say, that is quite a dense passage to throw at us near the end of your lecture; every sentence requires a gloss or careful interpretation and discussion. Yes, that is one reason why I chose it. I hope you will go home, look it up, and put your minds to it; there are, of course, other relevant texts on the subject, but I find this one, written in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the defeat of Napoleon, at the begining of the third decade of the nineteenth century, written by a poet versed in philosophy, science, political economy, and history, who dreamed of an ideal society and embodied that dream in a poetic drama, *Prometheus Unbound*, who, like Gandhi, was opposed to violence, and who saw that what he called the poetry of life could be brought into society only by courage and creativity and could survive only in a society of freedom and equality. Further, that the recognition of equality required the ability nourished by the imagination, to feel our way into the hearts of others and to see ourselves as others see us as well. In fact, he asserts the necessity of the imagination for the creation of democratic

culture, for it will not be created unless it be imagined, and once it is imagined needs to be embodied in our institutions and in our daily lives. Thus, as we recall the earlier passage, we see that in Shelley the imagination serves love, and they together create the poetry of life or the poetry that compensates for loves absence in life, and both stand opposed to the principle of Self. He thus joins hands with the mediaeval theolgians who saw the love of money (not money itself) as the root of all evil. Writing this at the dawn of the era of industrial capitalism, Shelley is remarkably prophetic, for it is the love of money that is driving many to ignore or diminish the Humanities in the interests of some quick way to get rich, or that turns professionals like lawyers and doctors and even teachers into money-making vocations rather than vocations of service. I have no objections to money, or rather to many of the essentials that money can buy, for we all must eat and have shelter and recreation and if human beings do not live on bread alone, it is equally true that without bread they do not live. But what I object to is a social, political, economic order based on avarice, if not greed, that by its nature seems to assert the principle of Self. Thus from my perspective the Humanities are essential because they call in question and fundamentally oppose the most destructive aspects the socitey we live in. Too many people in our world live lives well-padded with insensitivity;[1] when they think their padding is going to be disturbed, they begin to support the Barbarities. They begin to sound like the Nazi leader who said, "When I hear the word culture I draw my revolver." Those of us who support the Humanities, therefore, must realise that this is no more academic debate in the senior common room. No, this debate is taking place in the central and agonizing arena of the twentieth century. As I said on another occasion, the future of the Humanities is largely bound up with the future of Humanity; if we manage to destroy ourselves, there will be neither Humanity nor Humanities worth talking about. As the Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden put it many years ago;

> If we really want to live we better start at once to try;
> If we don't, it doesn't matter, and we better start to die.

1. Readers of George Eliot's great Novel, *Middlemarch*, will recognise my adaptation of her sentence describing people's lives as being "well-wadded with stupidity."

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