

Catriona Kelly and Martin McLaughlin

The Future of the Humanities

European Humanities Research Centre, University of Oxford, 19–20 March 2004

Conference Report

The aim of the conference, organised by Martin McLaughlin (Director of the European Humanities Research Centre) and Catriona Kelly (Co-Director) was to assess the changes that have taken place in the Humanities in the last thirty-five years and to consider what the future of the humanities might be in the twenty-first century. The Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA), founded in Cambridge in 1918, organized the first such conference in 1968 as part of its fiftieth anniversary celebrations, the proceedings being published in J. C. Laidlaw (ed.), *The Future of the Modern Humanities* (1969). This follow-up conference, organised in co-operation with the MHRA and other relevant bodies, such as the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) was meant to examine the enormous changes that have taken place in the Humanities since 1968, and to outline the implications for the future. In order to do this, major authorities on the Humanities were invited to speak, and a wide range of topics was covered in the five different sessions. Financial support came from the Europaeum and the

Modern Languages Faculty of Oxford University, and from the MHRA.

The first session, 'Humanities and the Modern University' was addressed by Malcolm Bowie (Master of Christ's College, Cambridge, and former director of the EHRC), who spoke about his vision for a humanities research centre as a 'laboratory' offering a forum and refuge for scholars in different disciplines, and working in different ways, to meet and discuss their work. The concrete activities of such a centre were outlined by Ludmilla Jordanova, from the Centre for Research in Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities in the University of Cambridge, who pointed in particular to the benefits of such a centre in terms of collaborative work and in bringing to the centre of academic and public attention subjects that might otherwise seem marginal (here her key example was a project on the shonami, Persian traditional epic, and on the ways in which this has been rewritten to reflect regime changes). She also discussed problems for centres of this kind in British universities at present, both because of scarce resourcing and because of methodological anxieties (how should one do inter-disciplinary research, for instance). Annie Cot (Directeur, Department d'Epistomologie Economique at the Maison des sciences économiques, University of Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne) spoke about the cultural location of the humanities in France and about the current threat posed to research and the future of the grandes écoles by government cuts, which provoked mass resignations by directors of such institutes, including herself, on 9 March 2004. A different perspective was offered by Martin McLaughlin, who talked about where the humanities had come from in order to assess their present and possible future directions: from the invention of the humanities in the Italian Renaissance, and particularly Petrarch's discovery and reinterpretation of the concept in the writings of Cicero, he outlined ways in which the humanities had evolved by constantly crossing borders with other adjacent disciplines, even those such as medicine and law originally excluded by Petrarch.

Several very interesting presentations followed in the second session, 'ICT in the humanities'. David Robey spoke on behalf of the AHRB about the funding being made available to support the development of an 'ICT methods network', i.e. the furtherance of innovation in ICT use (over 40 per cent of successful grant applications to the AHRB now include an IT component, but in many cases the IT use is conservative, with digitisation employed as no more than a 'receptacle' for archived material, rather than the methods of accessing and working with this being radically transformed). He pointed to work in e-science (see <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/escience/>) and e-social science (<http://www.ncess.org>) as models for the humanities. Michael Fraser, Coordinator of the Research Technolo-

gies Service within Oxford Universities Computing Service, demonstrated the Humbul humanities hub (<http://www.humbul.ac.uk>), and an example of a portal allowing targeting of internet resources by individuals (see project site with demonstrator, <http://portal.humbul.ac.uk>). Other speakers demonstrated individual e-projects. Marilyn Deegan, from King's College, London, talked in particular about the Digital Shikshapatri (<http://www.shikshapatri.org.uk/>), which has made available for long-distance consultation a sacred text of the Swaminarayan sect of Hindus, complete with historical commentary, alternative translations (to reflect the different traditions of interpretation observed by different groups within the sect), illustrations of the text and its case, and information about the religious background to the text. The site was set up with the cooperation of the Swaminarayan community, and is now used for veneration ceremonies by its members. Alan Bowman, Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford, spoke about how advances in ICT have helped with the interpretation of ancient documents, taking as his example the collection of Romano-British texts known as the Vindolanda Tablets. Techniques developed to read the incisions on the tablets have simultaneously proved of use in collating mammogram results held in different systems across the United Kingdom, showing how the sciences/humanities divide is in many respects now redundant. Robert McNamee, of the Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford, talked briefly about the Electronic Enlightenment project (<http://www.e-enlightenment.info>), which is intended not just to make available texts, but also to allow users to follow the entire process of correspondence and collaboration that took place during the Enlightenment. All the speakers emphasised the benefits that could be brought by ICT, both in facilitating old types of research (e.g. linguistic and stylistic analysis), and in creating new ones, though Robert McNamee also observed that many users still resort to ICT in an unduly passive and uninformed way, either considering the information available on the internet as intrinsically suspect, or working with search engines in a primitive and incurious way (expecting precise results from single keyword searches on major engines such as Google).

The session following on the Humanities and Europe was intended to remind participants that the 'European' element in the EHRC's title just as urgently required discussion as the 'Humanities' element. Alexis Tadié, Director of the Maison Française in the University of Oxford, talked about the Maison as an instance of a new kind of European knowledge-transference, based on collaboration and interchange rather than promotion of national cultures. Joseph Sherman, Corob Fellow in Yiddish Studies, University of Oxford, spoke of the way that Yiddish had traditionally been seen as hardly 'European', reinforcing the marginal status of the Jewish commu-

nity. By the late twentieth century, it had become a museum artefact, rather than a living language, with a high profile in departments of linguistics; but Yiddish literary culture was still neglected in mainstream 'European' cultures such as Britain, with many important texts left untranslated and unknown to the general public. The two other papers were more general in character. Oswyn Murray (Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford) addressed the question of whether 'Europe' still had a meaning in the twentieth century, as compared with the past, when Christianity and humanism acted as glue for European identity. A concept of European civilisation had become established in the eighteenth century and dominated thought until the outbreak of the First World War. In the twentieth century, the dominance of such views had broken down, but the legacy of humanist values was of central importance as a defence against the persecution of intellectuals in the twentieth century: here he pointed to the work of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (formed in 1934 to assist Jewish intellectuals suffering oppression in Third Reich Germany), and suggested that efforts of this kind should be made in order to support intellectuals in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. By contrast, Edward Acton (professor of European History at the University of East Anglia) argued that the term 'European' was largely meaningless (in Africa, for instance, it generally meant anyone white, including Americans). But most of his presentation was devoted to a passionate and very entertaining assault on current practice in research, which he sees as characterised by a descent into trivia and a total failure to persuade the wider world, whether the government establishment or the general public, that research in the humanities has a value.

Something of the same theme was handled quite differently in the keynote lecture by John Frow, Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Edinburgh, and author of several important texts in the field of cultural studies, for example *Time and Commodity Culture* (1997). His lecture attacked the notion that there had ever been a golden age of freedom and autonomy in humanities research: rather, those working in the humanities had always constituted a specific 'knowledge class', or socio-political interest group, characterised by its closeness to bureaucracy and bureaucratic rationalism. The values characterising such a group could not be universal by definition, and justifying the humanities as though they were was therefore a futile strategy. From this analysis of the past, supported by a close critique of the essays by Parker and Levin in the MHRA volume from 1968, he moved to an analysis of the present. He suggested that academics were wrong to get caught up in the 'pathos of victimisation' current in the universities. Wider access for students was a positive development, which should not be lamented; the transformation of research agendas by funding bodies could be intellectually stimulating. He

emphasised the possibilities of the free circulation of ideas that now existed, while also underlining the need for fundamentally new forms of self-definition and self-defence in a world where the public domain now stood for iconicity and the display of bodies.

Session four, which took place on the second day, was addressed by several representatives of British grant-awarding bodies. Peter Brown, from the British Academy, gave a brief history of the Academy's role as a conduit for competitively-allocated government-derived monies in the humanities, from the early 1960s, when the system was set up, through the gradual devolution of such duties as the Social Sciences Research Council, followed by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (to become a funding council in 2005) were set up. Representation of subjects had taken a second place to funding administration, but the Academy was hoping to raise the profile of the former role in future years. He emphasised that the humanities were in many respects in a more advantageous position with respect to research funding than they had been over the last 30–35 years. A more cautious position was taken by Malcolm Cook, the Chair of the MHRA, who emphasised the need to defend the humanities, and particularly research in European languages, in the face of the difficulties and obstacles created by research censuses and audits, which had led to a devaluation of work in some areas, such as bibliography and journal editing, and in the face of the current crisis in modern languages teaching in the United Kingdom. The third speaker, Michael Jubb, Director of Policy and Programmes at the AHRB, spoke about the transition to research council status and what this would mean for the future. He emphasised the need to create a clear profile for humanities research, and to think in detail about the contribution that it could make in a general social context. He forecasted that interdisciplinary research was likely to be a growth area (as argued also in the November 2003 paper, 'The Arts and Humanities: Understanding the Research Landscape'), and that there would be a need to develop and strengthen collaborative work. He also urged participants to scrutinise the recent Treasury framework document on the development of the sciences, where 'science' is taken in the sense of the French science or German Wissenschaft, to refer to academic intellectual activities of every description. He also raised interesting questions about whether the traditional forms of academic output, the journal article and the monograph, were really the best ways of publicising humanities research.

The final session, 'Humanities and "Outreach"' dealt directly with the issue of how to reach a non-academic public that had been touched on repeatedly in other sessions. Christopher Brown, Director of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, spoke about how the museum draws on research activities in its work with the public — examples including the redisplay of Ruskin's drawings to reflect the

didactic work for which he himself used them, or an touring exhibition for the Millennium that drew on cutting-edge archaeological discoveries, or exhibitions for children and the general public that combined dissemination of new work on provincial Roman coinage with hands-on displays of how such coins were made. Valentine Cunningham, Professor of English at the University of Oxford, who has a high profile as a reviewer for the literary press and as a broadcaster, emphasised the crucial importance of the humanities to the general literary press, while also underlining the dangers in terms of dilution of intellectual analysis that could come about when scholarly work was presented to a broader readership. Finally, Bill Swainson, Senior Commissioning Editor at Bloomsbury Press in London, spoke about how work in the humanities reaches literary publishers, concentrating on the role of translation, and stressing that editorial decisions were concerned with the intellectual interest and artistic quality of the fiction and non-fiction under consideration, as well as with likely success in the book market.

At some level, then, all of the sessions were concerned with the rationale for work in the humanities in modern Europe, the philosophy behind such work, and the best way of presenting it to a non-specialist audience (including government officials and funding bodies). On the whole, questions were generated, rather than answers provided, and considerable diversity emerged as to whether the traditional understanding of the humanities going back to the Renaissance (as the investigation of human nature and ethical and aesthetic values) was sustainable or obsolete, with some suggesting it should be reasserted, and others, jettisoned. A good deal of diversity also emerged in terms of the methodologies, techniques for the future, and relationship with funding bodies, which were predicted. Some of the discussion was specific to the United Kingdom — for example, the expression of a high level of anxiety about the ‘dumbing down’ of academic discourse in the public domain versus the view, on the other hand, that academic ‘jargon’ was best done without in the first place. However, the more abstract levels of debate — relating to the position of humanities researchers in society, their possible status as a ‘knowledge class’, and their vulnerability to shifts in government policy as the ‘rational bureaucracy’ itself transmorphs into a fundamentally different type of interest group — are applicable to a wider European context, as the contributions from French academics and (in the discussion) from Czech and German academics indicated.