The Humanities, the Idea of a University, and a Bit of Higher Education Plain Speak

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***Abstract*:** This article is premised on the idea that the humanities, with the features that are outlined here, have a larger-than-usually-recognised say in the way the university as an institution and higher education in general ought to operate towards actualising its full potential. Beginning with a historical background, traced back to the liberal arts of Graeco-Roman antiquity and Renaissance humanism, it examines the possibilities that are innate to the humanities as a disciplinary spectrum, as well as its predicaments. It discusses, among other things, issues related to a general versus specialised higher education, the rationale for and methodology in the humanities, and the contrastive relationship that it has articulated vis-à-vis what it is not. The article goes on to argue and demonstrate, in the third section, that literary studies, being a meeting point of several disciplines, is equipped to serve as a humanistic meta-discipline. For illustration, it takes up issues pertaining to the East-West debate in literary studies, a case in point for the humanities in general, scientism, and the possibilities of cross-fertilisations among literary, religious, and philosophical studies. The last section candidly raises pertinent questions concerning knowledge production and dissemination in the humanities, in the context of contemporary higher education scenario, and probes the hardly discussed reasons behind stagnation in research.

***Keywords*:** Humanities, University, John Henry Newman, Literary Studies, Meta-discipline, Meta-questions

Back to Some Precedents

In 1852, John Henry Newman (1801-1890), poet, priest, theologian, educationist, and a leading light of the Oxford Movement, published a volume of lectures entitled *The Idea of a University*. In the context of secularisation of major Catholic universities on the Continent, *The Idea of a University* sought to navigate a middle way between 'free thinking' and religio-moral education, one that acknowledged the claims of knowledge (research and publication free from Church censorship) as well as those of revelation (here, promoting the teachings of the Catholic Church). The present article is not about the challenges associated with the secularisation of universities, though for those of us who were part, as mentors or mentees, of

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the recent *Deeksharambham* student induction programme, and its emphasis on cultivation of values, Newman's work might evoke thoughts of cross-cultural resonance. To have advocated education in the liberal arts, as Newman did despite objections, might seem too stale an espousal today. Similarly, in a climate that emphasises cultural conditioning and, at least implicitly, views cultural production as a function of received codes and (collective) discourses, his assertion that literature is "essentially a personal work" (Newman, 2008, p. 3) might sound obsolete. Nonetheless, that is, regardless of its original context and content that is representative of old school ways of doing the humanities, for over a century and a half, Newman's title and many of his observations have become emblematic for those who would like to reflect on the state of the university, of higher education, and of the humanities.

Newman's endorsement of an "education [that] should aim at producing generalists rather than narrow specialists" and of "non-vocational subjects—in arts or pure science—[that] could train the mind in ways applicable to a wide range of jobs" (Anderson, 2009) is a point of departure for reflections on higher education, especially in the contemporary context. As I have put it bluntly elsewhere,

> The subjects, authors and texts whose loss was lamented then [in the background is J. H. Plumb's collection of essays entitled *Crisis in the Humanities*, published in 1964], no longer prepare ... students for a career in the larger world, with only a few acquiring, or feeling the need for acquiring, the specialised acumen needed to deal with these in a university or college setting. The nature of experience has inevitably changed. Repertoire of the quotidian has changed.... resources for mental and moral formation have also changed in character and availability. So have values. Today, many consciously work to develop the qualities which Arthur Miller's Willy Loman might have admired. Perhaps more important than this historical change (the question is not exactly whether you teach about the past or the present) is the still valid difference between the 'general' student in higher education and the would-be academic 'specialist'—in today's globalised context, that between a would-be content writer for the web or a call-centre executive on the one hand and a wannabe professor on the other. Do you want to join an accent neutralisation course or study Heidegger? Obviously, none can underestimate the value of job-fetching, income-generating 'life-skills.'... Learning of preferred accents, fashionable idioms, presentation skills and even a sophisticated body language (the right way to shrug your shoulders!) will land you a job in the higher echelons of the economic hierarchy. Reading Heidegger will not, unless you are on the look-out for openings in the philosophy departments of colleges and universities. (George, 2019a, pp. 6-11)

The distinction made between skills and knowledge is obviously not new. As early as 4th century BCE, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle had made a distinction among *episteme* (theoretical knowledge), *technê* (craft), and *phronesis* (practical wisdom and ethics). But perhaps the first 'modern' thinker to discern a distinction of the above kind was Immanuel Kant. To Kant (1997), "education" was different from "training," the former focusing on reason, character, and moral maxims, and the latter concentrating on skills. Such discernment also underlines the emphasis of Educational Perennialism upon reasoning and wisdom as opposed to facts and technical proficiency. How does this background knowledge aid a rethinking in the present?

The Humanities: A Retrospect (and a Prospect)

As we know, the modern concept of the humanities takes off from the seven Graeco-Roman *liberal* arts (as opposed to *practical* arts, such as medicine and architecture): the trivium

(grammar, rhetoric, logic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). The *umanisti*, humanist scholars of the Renaissance, taught *humanitas* (subjects of secular knowledge) as opposed to *divinitas* (which dealt with God and divinity). They lay particular emphasis on the classics of Graeco-Roman antiquity, which, to them, embodied what historian Will Durant (1953) called the "mental and moral heritage of the race" (p. 47). They saw in these texts a fruitful basis for education and for the moulding of a perfect individual – a man of action, contemplation, and passion. Books were credited with infinite power to teach a virtuous life. As Maurice Evans (1967) observes, "learning and the good life [came to be regarded as] almost synonymous; to know the best is to pursue it" (p. 14). The Renaissance idea of the complete man (*l'uomo universale*) consisted of the health of the body, the strength of character, and wealth of mind (Durant, 1953, p. 250). The idea of the Renaissance man is envisioned in Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528), translated into English by Sir Thomas Hoby as *The Courtier* (1561). The book defines a 'gentleman' (a public servant at an Italian court, in particular) of refined culture, inner beauty of spirit, gentle birth, and chivalric values.

It would be a lacuna to not consider these proto-humanities in the context of the Renaissance *Zeitgeist*. The Renaissance embodied a new philosophy – reaffirmation of life and a zest for its marvels. It was characterised by freedom of thought, limitless ambition, love of splendour, aesthetic sensitivity, respect for the healthy human body (as evident in Leonardo Da Vinci's interest in human anatomy), a keen appreciation of beauty, meticulous scholarship, and a new and broader acquaintance with the world. Whereas the Christian theologians of the mediaeval period propounded the fallen character of man, the Renaissance scholars, drawing upon Platonic ideas, believed in the nobility and possibilities of the human mind. An ambience of exuberance and intelligence permeated every endeavour. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), quite rightly called the "Manifesto of the Renaissance," emphasised human capacity for achievement, man's quest for knowledge, and the role to be played by liberal arts in both.

The superlative claims of the Renaissance have been, however, disputed in recent times with critical revaluations of European cultural history. It is pointed out that due to the hierarchical organisation of the respective societies that witnessed the movement, it was only a small section of the population, namely male members of the political and intellectual elite, who benefitted from the cultural revival (Hiscock, 2008, p. 117). Renaissance affirmations were not a 'disinterested' phenomenon either – it was part of the "Renaissance self-fashioning," as theorisfed by Stephen Greenblatt (1995), intended to secure employment in the court. The contemporary "learning of preferred accents, fashionable idioms, presentation skills and even a sophisticated body language," mentioned earlier, perhaps has an uncanny precedent in this "self-fashioning."

What is of import to us here, and as hinted at by the dichotomy of *humanitatis* and *divinitatis* and of liberal and practical arts, is the fact that the humanities articulated for itself a contrastive position vis-à-vis what it was not. Originally, the entities in this contrastive relationship were *studia humanitatis* and *studia divinitatis* (The Renaissance saw the beginning of a secular culture in European history).[1] Today the humanities have come to define themselves in contrast to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines. Do contrastive such

self-definitions suffice for a discipline (or disciplinary spectrum)? Many encyclopaedias call the humanities a study of human culture. Certainly, this is not only acceptable but can also be given a big thumbs up if "culture" is seen as an inclusive category. Stanford Humanities Center defines the humanities, and rightly so, as a "study of how human beings process and document experience," experience being an inclusive term like culture when it comes to dealing with the human world. I have myself endeavoured to understand the humanities in terms of what I have proposed to call "the human world process" (George, 2019a, pp. 12-20).

A glance at a representative reader of the so-called New Humanities will apprise us of the current trends. Take, for example, *The New Humanities Reader* (5th edition, 2015) edited by Richard E. Miller and Kurt Spellmeyer. This invaluable compendium presents, besides an introduction to reading and writing about the New Humanities, essays on topics as diverse as religion (religious studies is regarded as part of the humanities), sexual freedom, Google, classroom makeover, love, urban crime, global warming, junk food, styles of imprisonment, telling war stories, disability, rent seeking and the making of an unequal society, gender and geometry, neighbours, and depression – a fairly comprehensive assemblage of contemporary concerns. It may be objected that this only brings together the concerns of multiple disciplines (e.g., religious studies, gender studies, literature, and psychology). For instance, it may be argued that cultural studies already takes up some of the issues listed here in its own way. It is a different matter altogether whether cultural studies would like to consider itself part of the disciplinary spectrum called the humanities – at least in a non-traditional sense. But cultural studies does not profess to deal with a fixed subject matter of its own. It can study any phenomenon or practice under the sun, but using certain specific tools and concepts (e.g., representation and discourse). Will cultural studies be open to studying the spatial configurations of a rural community in India using Heidegger's idea of being? Very unlikely. If *instauratio de studibus humanitatis* (renewal of the humanities) is our objective, what we need, at the moment, is a clear blueprint for a holistic humanities – one that is accommodative enough to deal with a multiplicity of concerns through an open-ended, pluralistic, participative, dialogical, and self-conscious expansion of the academic discourse across previously excluded spaces, groups, and cultures, while at the same time working towards a framework that can address meta-questions.

But why do we need the humanities at all?[2] Effective teaching, learning, and research in any discipline depend upon being able to understand its *raison d'être*, the modes of reasoning possible in it, and a rigorous appreciation of the knowledge hitherto produced. Let me deal with the first: the *raison d'être* or a rationale for the humanities. Martha Nussbaum, in her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), assigns a four-fold responsibility to the humanities: "searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, understanding the complexity of the world we live in" (p. 7). These could be relevant for the study of problems that we might not even have imagined. Take, for instance, the question of marginality, which enjoys much academic and experiential currency in India. Why do we need critical thought? We need it because "assumptions ... underlie the way we think, speak and act. In our day-to-day lives, we take many things for granted. We socially inherit notions, and lead our lives assuming that these are 'eternal verities.' The result is subservience to habit. Something appears

good because we have been doing it for a long time" (George, 2019a, p. 7). Imagination, as J. K. Rowling (2011), who took this faculty to the heights of unprecedented glory, reminds the audience in her Harvard Commencement Speech, enables us to empathise with the plight of those who go through experiences we have not. This again is closely related to Nussbaum's third point, namely empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds. The fourth – understanding the complexity of the world we live in – is even more significant. Often we tend to think of the human world in black and white (If we truly understand this world, its inhabitants, and their life worlds, we will be able to appreciate the fact or possibility that there are not fifty but five thousand shades of grey!), in terms of binaries, in terms of "us" and "them." As social psychology would tell us, behind prejudice, especially of a racial or ethnic kind, is the assumption of an in-group heterogeneity (we have a lot of internal differences among us) coupled with that of an out-group homogeneity (they are all same!). As is evident today in social discourse, the capacity of participants therein to see the system as a whole – holistic thinking on a social scale – is on the decline. The intellectual, discursive position you take depends upon which side of the table you are on. Ultimately, it is a matter of intellectual good faith.

As regards the method of the humanities, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), German psychologist, historian, and hermeneutic philosopher, made a distinction between the methods of natural and physical sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and those of the humanities and social sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) – *Erklären* (law-governed causal explanation) for the former, and *Verstehen* (interpretive understanding) for the latter. Even today, interpretation (*Auslegung*) is a derivative of *Verstehen*, especially post Heidegger (1962). Today, it is a commonplace that the hard sciences use empirical, experimental methods whereas the humanities take recourse to critical, speculative 'methods,' if any. No one could have any objection to the critical method. But speculation? Is knowledge based on speculation a valid form of knowledge? The humanities are not only critical and speculative but also *integrative* (Courtesy: Homi K. Bhabha, 2013). It is due to this integrative character that they can take on larger roles vis-à-vis society and its issues, and to have a greater say in the way the university as an institution, its organisation, and its praxis take shape. The observations included in the final section of this article flow from this premise.

For the modes of reasoning possible in a discipline, an understanding whereof I have listed as a prerequisite for effective teaching, learning, and research, let me give the example of literary studies. By and large, literary studies follow what can be called "analogous reasoning," not a cause-and-effect one. This understanding has a bearing on the kind of research that is done and can be done in the field. But in a classic case of stagnation in literary research, seventy-five percent of the output here, including dissertations, articles, books, and book chapters, merely recirculates three popular tendencies: ideological criticism (a subtype of what Paul Ricoeur calls "hermeneutics of suspicion"[3]), textual deconstruction, and unravelling the 'constructed' character of one concept or the other (e.g., gender, sexuality, nation, and disability).

Literary Studies as a Meta-Discipline

Literary studies, being a meeting point of several disciplines, has the potential to be a meta-discipline.[4] It has emerged as a disciplinary space for engagement with concerns that

are not exclusively its own. As a representative case, let us take up the effervescent East-West debate in the humanities. It is widely held that many Western concepts, paradigms, and perspectives fail to capture the singularity of experience in non-Western cultures. For instance, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence" (1988, p. 280) in the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is premised on the idea that the norms of discourse among the First World intellectuals render it difficult to understand the cultural subtleties of practices and problems in the so-called Third World. To begin with, advance of knowledge does not stop at disciplinary boundaries. Can it stop at national boundaries? However, there is something more to the question than what the answer implies. What we know today as Western discourse, which furnishes concepts, paradigms, and perspectives to academia, and is, upon the above view, falsely circulated as a universally valid one, operates on *two different planes*. On the first, the lower, it is a partisan one. For example, the human of Western humanism has been traditionally a short hand for white European male. But on the next and higher plane, the so-called Western discourse – on this plane it is not exclusively Western but has elements from everywhere – has a meta-character with ample scope for self-critique and cross-cultural engagement.[5] The meta-discursive resources on this higher plane can be utilised for cross-cultural 'translation' of life worlds and their conceptual repertories.

Literary studies and the humanities in general are also equipped to deal with an issue they have not engaged that effectively, namely that of *scientism*. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines scientism as "an exaggerated trust in the methods of natural science applied to all areas of investigation." For our present purpose, we may adopt Sir Roger Scruton's simpler but immensely fruitful definition. According to Scruton (2013), scientism is "pretending to apply scientific method to a question that is not scientific." His example is the application of the theory of evolution to the question of sexual morality. A pertinent question for us here, which Scruton also raises, is whether the purposes of art (e.g., 'enhancement of life') can be understood in terms of "functional" explanations, which he critiques as inadequate. A response need not be restricted to stating that every discipline has its own canons of reasoning. It is more about whether the phenomenon in question is amenable to a 'scientific' explanation. Deciphering the sources of imaginative enchantment, or an endeavour towards a theory of subliminal effect in art, is again not a project whose relevance is restricted to literary-critical studies. Advocacy of interdisciplinarity, a prerequisite in this regard, would sound rather tautological, though.

Before substantiating the claim of literary studies to the status of a meta-discipline further, let me state the case of philosophy: "Philosophy, which apparently has the aura of a meta-humanistic discipline that looks into the [human world] process as a whole and attempts to understand it, has diversified into studies of the micro-logic of [its] parts. Hence, we have a philosophy of almost everything: a philosophy of walking, a philosophy of cooking, a philosophy of boredom and what not" (George, 2019a, p. 21). More on the state of philosophy will follow in the next quote. Advisedly, my work on religion has been part of an attempt to establish literary studies as a meta-discipline (the example of religious studies here is more illustrative than representative), in the place of philosophy or psychology, and tap into its possibilities:

> When it comes to research on religion, on the one hand, we encounter popular micro-empirical studies ... that often does not work out the implications of findings, and raises the question "So what?" [To bring in the spirit of the final section here, this is also the unraised question which members of the audience have on their faces at many a doctoral defence] On the other, we find *a narrow philosophising restricted to linguistic nitpicking and checking the logical validity of propositions*. While retaining the rigor of both, one needs to eschew their exclusivism and usher in well-considered cross-fertilisations among historical knowledge, philosophical reasoning, and hermeneutic possibilities. Far from being a pragmatic eclecticism, this approach [could] facilitate … an interface between history and philosophy, between interpretation and empiricism, between concepts and texts. The approach [could] open … up philosophical reasoning (which, to a great extent, means taking a thought to its logical conclusion with an eye for implications) from mere "language-games" to lived history. (George, 2019b, p. 106; emphasis added)

Even in literary studies, a good dissertation blends insightful textual analysis, effective historicisation, and some conceptual contribution.

Literary studies has a large repertoire of concepts and methods, many of which come in handy for an onto-hermeneutic analysis of religious narratives and doctrines. I have suggested an *ontological criticism* of religious narratives and doctrines, which a literary critic can perform efficiently. From literary studies, one may employ the recognition that narratives can draw into the vortex of their internal dynamics the distinction between the real and the unreal, and transmute them into another binary: what is aesthetically (or formally) efficacious and what is not. Such an ontological criticism of religious texts can reveal boundaries between a purely narrative/formal unontological discourse (a *fabula-matrix*; *not* fabulism) and a discourse with uncompromising ontological claims (an *onto-matrix*) to be porous. Same words and devices – e.g., metaphor, personification, antonomasia, and allegory – can be used in both. These narratives and doctrines can become ontologically ambivalent or self-conscious, or even get de-ontologised (as it happens to the image in cinema; there need not be a figure to produce the image), thus diluting their claims. Though purportedly guided by 'logic' (or epistemological convenience), even philosophico-religious concepts such as "the unmoved mover" and the unviability of "infinite regress" are subtype of a free ontology, restricted only by historically limited notions of 'possibility.'

Moreover, literature and religion have been viewed as discourses in which one can look for *meanings* instead of *referents*. Although the examples given below, unlike the earlier ones, might not necessarily establish literary studies as a meta-discipline for the study of religion, strong affinities are evident in George Santayana's *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, Kenneth Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, the Chapter "Religious Naturalism in Literature" in Jerome A. Stone's *Religious Naturalism Today*, the widespread allegorical interpretations of religious narratives (e.g., Euhemerus, Giambattista Vico), and the ambivalence of religious systems about, as well as switch between, *realistic and symbolic conceptions* of its (supernatural) object, facilitating *a two-plane engagement*. According to Santayana (1989), religion differs from poetry and other products of the imagination in its pragmatic effect. Religion "differs from a mere play of the imagination in one important respect; it reacts directly upon life; it is a factor in conduct. Our religion is the poetry in which we believe" (p. 20). Similarly, Sallie McFague, the author of *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, even observes that "theological models are closer to literary models than to scientific models: the model of God the father, for instance, is an initial metaphor that

has become a model through its extensive use and increasing explanatory usefulness" (Diller and Kasher, 2013, p. 975). Further, groundbreaking research has brought to light the theological basis of Western humanities and social sciences.[6] Conceptual research of the above kind on religion can complement this.

Higher Education Plain Speak

In a blog provocatively entitled "Why Professors are Writing Crap that Nobody Reads," published on 26 October 2016, Daniel Lattier reveals that:

> 82 percent of articles published in the humanities are not even cited once.
>
> Of those articles that are cited, only 20 percent have actually been read.
>
> Half of academic papers are never read by anyone other than their authors, peer reviewers, and journal editors.

Lattier asks: "Why does the world continue to be subjected to just under 2 million academic journal articles each year?" According to him, the reasons behind the "pretty bleak" "numbers" given above are as follows: "many academic articles today are merely exercises in … 'creative plagiarism': rearrangements of previous research with a new thesis appended on to them." It is generally said in a lighter vein that 'stealing from one source is plagiarism, stealing from several sources is research.' Lattier continues:

> Another reason is increased specialisation in the modern era, which is in part due to the splitting up of universities into various disciplines and departments that each pursue their own logic.... One unfortunate effect of this specialisation is that the subject matter of most articles make[s] them inaccessible to the public, and even to the overwhelming majority of professors. (… most academics don't even want to read their peers' papers.)

Lattier concludes with the following observation: "Ideally, the great academic minds of a society should be put to work for the sake of building up that society and addressing its problems. Instead, most Western academics today are using their intellectual capital to answer questions that nobody's asking on pages that nobody's reading."

Indeed the above data pertains to the so-called Western academic world. It is for us to introspect how things stand in the intellectual takeout India edition. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is clamping down on predatory 'pay-and-publish' journals that have thriven on the 'publish-or-perish' fears of academia. The UGC has also initiated a review of the doctoral dissertations produced in the last ten years – not to penalise, but to ascertain what has gone wrong. According to some sources (reports from the field!), less than ten percent of the doctoral dissertations in the humanities produced in India have made any solid contribution to the existing body of knowledge, which is after all the objective of research. In literary studies, as earlier discussion demonstrates, seventy-five percent of research is merely a recirculation of just three critical clichés (an oxymoron). What could be the reasons for these? An anti-plagiarism software is only a means of post-fact scrutiny. But why are scholars compelled to plagiarise? Why is research stagnant? When it comes to doctoral research, the reason is often the exact opposite of what Lattier claims. A lack of specialisation is the Achilles heel of research in India.

Foremost among the reasons for stagnation in knowledge production is a generalist approach to research. Only specialised research can breed further research. PhD participants sometimes get to know, if at all, about key works in their field of research only in the later stages of their research. The purpose of not only literary criticism but also of academic discourse is, to borrow Matthew Arnold's words, "to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and ... in its turn making this known, *to create a current of true and fresh ideas*" (1880, 2009; emphasis added). A lack of this, at least in literary studies, is compensated for, by the circulation of a readymade critical idiom. More often than not, the use of such an idiom is hardly an indicator of critical intelligence. On the contrary, such use betrays a lack of critical understanding and a non-attempt at nuanced reasoning. The result is a bunch of clichés, truisms, and platitudes that passes off as scholarship – tropes and trappings of scholarship rather than scholarship itself. Inculcation of language proficiency is necessary but insufficient for research. Contrary to popular perception, the latter has much more to it than speaking English with skewed mouths and puffed cheeks (a colonial hangover?)!

The second reason, mentioned earlier, is a lack of understanding concerning the calculi of reasoning in the disciplinary field (e.g., analogous reasoning in literary studies). The fundamental questions for a researcher are: What kind of argumentation is possible in the field? What kind of claims is permitted? Choosing what kind of research topics will lead to a solid addition to the existing body of knowledge? Does originality in literary research, for instance, merely mean researching on less-worked-on texts? Are the advantages of a first-generation critic the sole criterion for the choice of topics/texts? Indeed, everyone chooses to work on what makes sense on one's cognitive-affective continuum, what one is able to 'cathect' – sometimes, something that makes one's blood boil. Over the years, a gross sensationalism has taken over in the name of 'engagement.' A topic, or any concern for that matter, that does not involve squatting in protest in front of the administrative complex of an institution is somehow deemed irrelevant!

Evidently, matters are much more complex. A precondition for both knowledge production and knowledge dissemination, especially in the humanities, is a refined, sophisticated academic discourse that enables participants to make subtle distinctions and connections and articulate these in the form of higher-order statements. The unpleasant aspect of this plain truth is that not even one percent of the country's populace – it is not much better even within institutions of higher education – has access to this discourse. As is widely known, huge disparities pervade higher education in India. While the sociological dimensions of this phenomenon make news, its intellectual aspects are not only overlooked but also dismissed as 'elitism.' One does acknowledge that much talk of 'merit' is a camouflage for social exclusion. However, this does not mean that there is no such thing as intellectual excellence.

A forum that apparently creates and nurtures a discourse of the above-mentioned kind is academic conferences. Indeed, some of them are nominal exercises (A well known academic, when I emailed him saying that I saw him at a conference venue but was unable to meet and greet him, replied that he generally avoided conferences like the plague and was there only because an acquaintance had invited him). A more serious problem is that many of these conferences are not *cumulative* in their impact (even research is cumulative). Ideas are not carried to their logical conclusion through a follow-up (One is reminded of J. K. Rowling's

statement in hindsight that she could not "remember a single word" of what the distinguished philosopher Baroness Mary Warnock said at the former's graduation ceremony). This is more or less the case with journal articles too. Of course, the other extreme is when two authors carry on an endless conversation in print, through several issues and sometimes volumes.

The sad fact about the higher education scenario is that the intellectual cause has no priest, prophet, advocate, or brand ambassador – especially in the case of the humanities, which has had the reputation of being a 'soft' discipline. A corollary is the absence of any well-thought-out criterion for ascertaining intellectual merit, or reflection thereof. More often than not, rhetorical efficacy is mistaken for critical intelligence. All these have a bearing on the way in which students are admitted to various academic programmes (granular questions in entrance tests do not necessarily test the research aptitude of applicants) and they or candidates for faculty positions are evaluated. Though the figure of the 'intellectual' has been widely burlesqued in popular culture, after one has entered the arena of higher education, one no longer has the luxury of uttering the word, noun or adjective, with irony! This ought to be axiomatic for those who still think that matters that actually matter are 'high funda' and are subsidiary to routine exercises in institutional self-perpetuation. On the other hand, those who are engaged in labours that matter might wonder, as John Milton (1638) did, three-and-a-half centuries ago, in the idiom of a pastoral elegy, against the backdrop of a studious Edward King's death off the Welsh coast, whether burning the midnight oil was worth it:

> *Alas! what boots it with incessant care*
> *To* tend the homely, slighted shepherd's trade,
> And *strictly meditate the thankless Muse*?
> Were it not better done, as others use,
> To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
> Or with the tangles of Neæra's hair?
> Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
> (That last infirmity of noble mind)
> *To scorn delights and live laborious days*.... (emphasis added)

Regardless of whether we agree with the last three lines quoted here, or even the rest, the implications are quite clear. It is time for stocktaking, an invite to which is already in the air.

Notes

1   Of course, the Renaissance did not sever the otherworldly connections of this world but recognised the place due to the temporal earthly existence of mortal beings beside eternity, in the divine scheme of things. The theocentric conception of the universe, however, yielded place to an anthropocentric philosophy called humanism, by which man became the measure of all things.

2   For a detailed discussion of the humanities, its rationale, and the salient features of knowledge therein, see George, 2019a, Chapter 1, "The Humanities: An Ugly Duckling among Alma Mater's Pets." Here I have observed, among other things, that "in the long run we shall move towards a qualified generalisation which places the sciences in the 'means' column of knowledge, and the humanities in the 'ends' column (provided they make use of their innate possibilities)" (p. 8).

3   "Hermeneutics of suspicion" is a term coined by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. It is a mode of interpretation which aims to reveal disguised meanings: "This type of hermeneutics is animated by ... a skepticism towards the given, and it is characterised by a distrust of the symbol as a dissimulation of the real" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 6).

Ricoeur contrasts this kind of hermeneutics with the "hermeneutics of faith," concerned with the "restoration" of meanings.

4   For a three-fold rationale for literary studies, along with a historical survey of justifications given in this regard, see George, 2019a, Chapter 2, "If Literary Studies Were to Disappear from the Spectrum of Academic Disciplines…".

5   Tony Davies (1997) traces the tradition of internal critique and dialectical contention that mark Western discourse back to the Renaissance humanists, whose hospitable argumentation and often "acrimonious fallings out" testify more to heterogeneous, eclectic, open-ended, and ironic intellectual cultures than "allegiance to a shared ideological or intellectual programme" (p. 70) or common values – *coincidentia oppositorum* or harmonious opposition, as Renaissance men called it.

6   Cf. M. H. Abrams's thesis, in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, that Romanticism is secularised theology.

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