

# The History and Potential of the Field of Literature in Liberal Arts Education<sup>1)</sup>

John Lee

## The Unexamined Essay

In 1997, I came to Japan for the first time, to begin what was to be a very happy year and a half working at Japan Women's University. It was an interesting time, as I began to experience, and learn a little about, a different culture — or, more accurately, a different collection of cultures. At the University, there were new courses and new procedures to become familiar with, as well as more complex challenges, such as working out the rather different professor-student relationship that existed, which was, in fact, also working out the slightly different person I had become through a short and simple flight from London, across Russia, and to Tokyo. In retrospect I realized what a privilege it had been to see a little of another culture not as a simple tourist, but as a semi-permanent guest.

One of the new procedures I was involved in was the marking of entrance examinations, a process which, in its university-specific nature, has all but disappeared from English universities.<sup>2)</sup> As I experienced it, this

- 
- 1) This article was first given as a lecture at ICU, 13 September 2010, as part of a series of lectures funded by the Ministry of Education, Japan. My thanks are owed to both institutions for the opportunity to take part.
  - 2) A couple of expressions need glossing in this sentence. (1) I write 'all but' as university-specific entrance examinations are, at the moment, enjoying a small renaissance, as English universities find that the national examination system which grades students on leaving school, the 'A-level' or 'Advanced General Certificate of Education' examinations, is no longer capable of distinguishing, to a fine enough degree, the best students. Overall, for example, the number of students getting the top grade has gone up consistently over the last 28 years,

was quite an intense process, in which, over a single weekend, all the examination papers were marked. Most of the time I was concentrating on trying to keep my marking consistent, and working out what the standard marking ranges were. In the breaks, I thought a little about the pros and cons of having a set of university specific exams, and some colleagues mentioned the fact, which I hadn't considered, that entrance examinations generate income. Some weeks later it came as a very pleasant surprise to find that the entrance exams had also generated revenue for me; I had been paid extra for taking part in the process, on top of my standard salary. This was a new concept to me: English academics' salaries, in my experience, were more or less independent of the amount of work done. If a colleague is asked to teach an extra class, or an extra five classes, or fill in hundreds of new pages of bureaucracy, there is no extra cost to the university. This, I believe, explains a lot of the willingness to employ a 'culture of continuous change': for universities, as far as academics' salaries are concerned, change is free. This is, rather ironically, one of the last vestiges of the 'ivory towers' notion of university life.

The marking day was interestingly different in other ways. The Department took very good care of us; they provided not only lunch, but a dinner, and these were very good, or so it seemed to me. The colleague who was in overall charge had brought in some vitamin sweets for our health (or, more to the purpose, for our encouragement). It was all very interesting, and tasty. The moment of the day I remember most clearly as being the most unusual, however, came in a conversation I had in the afternoon. The entrance examination consisted of a variety of assessment

---

from around 9% in 1982 to around 27% in 2010, at a time when the number of students taking the examinations has increased dramatically. In 2010, for the first time, a new top grade was introduced, the A\*, in an attempt to discriminate the true high achievers. This was awarded to around 8% of students. So it may be that the clock has been turned back, in respect of grading, some 28 years, in this respect. (2) I use 'English' as one cannot use 'British' in this context as the Scottish Higher Education system is significantly distinct from the English. Welsh and Northern Irish Higher Education are more similar to the English system.

tasks, but there was no essay question; that is, there was no invitation to students to write an essay discussing a judgement or assertion about an author or text, or to respond to a statement in the light of one's reading of an author or authors. I asked why this was — what the thinking was behind this omission. I do not know if the reply I received was correct, but I found it arresting. As replies often are, it was phrased as a question. 'Why,' I was asked, 'would you want to have an essay?' What is more, that question-answer was offered in a tone of surprise, the surprise being that I needed to ask a question to which the answer was so self-evident. Essays were problematic exercises, being remarkably subjective and remarkably hard to mark consistently.

Subjectivity is a large and fraught topic, and, what is more, loaded with cultural assumptions. Most assertions I have come across concerning the greater or lesser degree of priority given to subjective responses in the Japanese education system seem unsophisticated and unhelpful. My intention is not to add to them. First, I do not have the knowledge to make even such an unhelpful comparison, let alone a more helpful comparison; and second, while I do not have an opinion to offer about Japanese education, I see very little to suggest a lack of priority given to subjectivity in Japanese culture. More practically, Japan Women's University did examine its undergraduate literary students by essay, once those students were within, and advancing through, the University. Essays were used as a method of assessment; it was just that they were not considered appropriate for entrance examinations. What I found interesting about my colleague's answer to my question, then, and the reason why I remember it, was not for what it told me about Japan, or the Japanese university system, or Japan Women's University.<sup>3)</sup> Rather, it was that it brought into focus for me *my* assumption that the essay was the obvious foundation of the examination system — that the essay was the be-all and end-all when

---

3) I am aware that the importance of essays in entrance examinations has been a keenly contested issue at ICU, and that the ICU entrance examination was one of the key ways in which the University differentiated itself within the Japanese academic context.

it came to assessing English literature and other humanities subjects.

Like many, I suppose, I can remember writing my first essays, at around the age of 15. (As it happens, and probably with some predictability, they were on Shakespeare's *1 Henry 4* and George Orwell's *1984*.) It struck me at the time that I was being asked to do something unfamiliar and slightly peculiar, a something which I would now describe in terms of being asked to learn the conventions of a new genre. That genre had its subgenres; moving on through school and into university there were unseen close-reading based essays, essays based around topics, essays where the response had to be kept within the framework of literary history. Essays had become, in a way, an *unexamined* part of my life, although they were in fact the form by which I had been examined, and then, sometime later, the form by which I examined others.

### **Narrow England**

I start with an anecdote about essays in part to emphasize the personal nature of this paper. What follows is less a history of the field of literature in Liberal Arts Education than an interpretative account of some aspects of that history, combined with my sense of current status of the Liberal Arts in England. As part of that, towards the end of the paper, I also give my sense of why I think the Liberal Arts are important, and why I think literature, and, in particular, English literature, has of late been of especial importance to the Liberal Arts. The essay will, at that point, once again appear, this time to be to be examined. Now, though, I turn to the first question I was asked to address in my lecture — to consider the role and nature of a Liberal Arts Education in English Higher Education.

This question was a little difficult, as the obvious answer reminded me of that witty, if trite, reported response of Ghandi's when asked what he thought of Western civilization: 'I think it would be a good idea.' For, in general terms, it seemed to me that there is no Liberal Arts Education in English Higher Education. I tested my sense of this out on my colleagues, and they broadly agreed. The conversations would typically go along the lines: 'A Liberal Arts programme? Well that's more an American kind of

education, more generalist, and four years, not three.' And that's typically where the conversation would end. The notion of a Liberal Arts Education in English universities is rather an unconsidered topic: Liberal Arts are something rather strange and unknown; and they happen elsewhere.

There are qualifications to be made to that, both present and past. For example, at my own University, the University of Bristol, earlier this year, I was part of a Curriculum Working Group in the Faculty of Arts asked to consider our teaching programme. One of the possibilities considered was to bring in a Liberal Arts Education-style degree, and part of the reason for this was that there were other such degrees recently launched or being launched — at St Mary's University College, Belfast; at the University of Winchester; and at University College London (UCL).

One of the reasons for the appearance of these Liberal Arts degrees is Government strategy, especially that connected with the *Dearing Review* of 1996, and another is the influence of the USA. (It is probable, too, that the former is influenced by the latter.) The St Mary's University College website illustrates these influences nicely, as it explains what a Liberal Arts Education is, in an explanation which shows the 'foreign' nature of such a degree:

In support of Government policy to increase provision in Higher Education, St. Mary's has developed a BA degree in Liberal Arts.

What is a Liberal Arts degree?

By definition, a degree in Liberal Arts is a high quality general degree. It does not try to prepare you for a specific discipline or profession as with degrees in teaching, law, medicine, engineering and so forth. It is an education that fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition towards lifelong learning and an acceptance of responsibility for the consequences of our ideas and actions. Liberal Arts degrees are particularly well established in the USA. The Association of American Colleges and Universities defines

a truly Liberal education as one which “prepares people to live responsible, productive and creative lives in a dramatically changing world.”<sup>4)</sup>

There is, then, in the English Higher Education system at the moment a drive to broaden the educational experience on offer to students in Higher Education.<sup>5)</sup> It is by no means the first such drive; According to Stefan Collini, it was A.D. Lindsay (who held, among other posts of influence, the mastership of the Oxford college of Balliol from 1924) who was, in the early to mid-twentieth century, the pre-eminent figure urging arguments for a more generalist undergraduate curriculum.<sup>6)</sup> At Oxford, Lindsay introduced the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics degree, commonly referred to simply as PPE, which was intended to serve as a ‘Modern Greats school.’ This was needed as the ‘old’ ‘Greats,’ the four-year, generalist, classics- and philosophy-based degree, which had dominated Oxford education, and education in England, had been, from around the turn of the century, rapidly marginalized, under the impact of the model of the German research university with its disciplinary specialization.

The PPE degree itself was remarkably successful; not only has it survived at Oxford, but it is also a feature of the undergraduate curricula in many universities around the world. What is more, it has claims to be

---

4) <http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/academic/liberalarts/default.asp>. It is also worth noting the way in which St Mary’s uses ‘Liberal Arts degree’ as a term interchangeable with ‘Liberal Education.’ This goes against the more correct differentiation of these terms by the Association of American Colleges, but typifies British-English usage.

5) Or rather there was or may have been: it looks as if this reform drive is itself being overtaken by another reform drive to produce more graduates in STEM subjects (the acronym derives from Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). This is another characteristic of the present academic landscape in Britain. A willingness to change and follow political leadership often leads one very quickly into being seen to be doing the faddish and out-moded, and so to be in particularly urgent need of (more) change.

6) Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.462-464.

the defining degree of the political classes, to an extent that has sometimes been seen as worrying; as recent reports have noted, 6 members of the present UK cabinet have PPE degrees from Oxford University, as do 6 members of the shadow cabinet.<sup>7)</sup> In terms of combating specialization, or changing the university environment, it was less successful, as Lindsay recognized, and so he made plans to set up a new university. This would address the four major failings, as Lindsay saw them, of contemporary universities, all of which were effects of specialization:

1. The separation of specialist studies from the general understanding in which they should be rooted.
2. The separation of intellectual development from all-round development of the individual.
3. The separation of 'intelligentsia' from ordinary life; of the privileged elite from the community which they should serve.
4. The separation of different specialist views of the world which should balance and correct each other.<sup>8)</sup>

Lindsay's plans would bear fruit in the founding of Keele University in 1949 (at that time the University College of North Staffordshire), and, more indirectly, in the founding of Sussex University. Neither university, however, provided the catalyst for the general change in universities that Lindsay hoped, and both have, in fact, moved to curricula that are now generally disciplinary based.<sup>9)</sup> Clearly, however, the desire to counteract specialization, seen as problem of the modern age, has a long history. One

---

7) For a report on the present cabinet see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-11136511>. For a report on the present shadow-cabinet see <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/a-distinctly-oldschool-feel-to-a-new-generation-2101817.html>.

8) Collini, *Absent Minds*, p.463.

9) The majority of students at Keele University, for example, take joint-honour (combined) degrees. These, while less specialist than a degree in a single discipline, are not in any real sense generalist degrees. Many universities offer joint-honour degrees.

might even say the dissatisfaction that animates it is itself a part of the modernist ethos.

In my Faculty's discussions of the possibility of a Liberal Arts Education degree, the general feeling was not in favour. There were a variety of reasons for this, many of which were practical: there would be substantial difficulties in course structure and administration; there would be difficulties in the comparability of standards, if one tried to use already existing modules; and resistance amongst staff was expected. More importantly, there was scepticism about how much and how many students wanted such a degree. That scepticism was in large part driven by the hard fact that, in the English education system, students specialize early. For a typical school-child in England, a generalist education ceases, at the latest, at 16 years old, with the taking of between 5 and 10 GCSEs (the General Certificate of Secondary Education). At this point, those continuing at school choose 3 subjects to study for the next two years at 'A'-Level (Advanced Level). (Some students will take a couple of extra subjects in the first of those two years.) At 18, the student, in the overwhelming number of cases, chooses what single subject he or she will study for the next three years — be that History, Chemistry, Mathematics, Economics, or English. So a genuine Liberal Arts Education would have to reverse a process of specialization that had already occurred, which is difficult.

This was not meant to be the case. The *Dearing Review* had foreseen this problem and had, sensibly, made proposals for the broadening of secondary education, proposals which were taken up by two subsequent reports, *Qualifying for Success* (1997) and *Curriculum 2000*. All of these reports argued for the importance of broadening post-16 education in England. Essentially, though, this has not happened, and it is hard to see how a Liberal Arts Education could flourish in England without some fairly radical rearrangement of Secondary Education.

### **Broad America?**

There are, then, few examples of Liberal Arts Education in England, though

there is plenty of evidence of the desire, as with the 'Modern Greats' or PPE programme, to recover a more generalist education that was seen to be lost at sometime around the end of the nineteenth century. Wanting to get some sense of how such an education worked in current practice, I turned to look at America, where, in the already quoted words of St Mary's College's description, 'Liberal Arts degrees are particularly well established.' The situation I found there, however, surprised me, in that Liberal Arts Education programmes seemed similarly much more of the past than of the present. This is arguable, and partly a matter of definition; there is, for example, clearly a very great deal of effort being directed into the promotion of generalist education within American Higher Education, and that education is termed a Liberal Education. The relationship between such an education and the Liberal Arts, however, is another matter. In 1930, Floyd W. Reeves published an article considering whether the Liberal Arts college had a future.<sup>10)</sup> It had a very helpful subtitle: 'The Fate of the Independent Arts College if the Cleavage between the Freshman-Sophomore Years and the Junior-Senior Years persists.' Whether such Independent Arts colleges would survive seemed to Reeves an urgent question given the arrival and success of the system of majors, and the subsequent divide between the first, generalist, 2 years at university or college, and the last, specialist, 2 years. This 'line of cleavage,' as he calls it, already existed in 55% of colleges, 80% of endowed universities, and 90% of state universities.<sup>11)</sup> In other words, it looked as if Liberal Arts Education, along with Independent Arts Colleges, were already well on the way to becoming things of the past.

This was not a new anxiety. Reeves quotes President Butler of Columbia University from 1902. Butler worried that the Liberal Arts college had a difficult future, or none at all; these were worries that Butler felt particularly acutely as 'the liberal arts college, English in origin, is now

---

10) Floyd W. Reeves, 'The Liberal-Arts College,' *The Journal of Higher Education* (1930), pp.373-380.

11) *ibid*, p.374.

the most distinctly American feature of our educational system.’<sup>12)</sup> Butler’s proposal was for the colleges to reduce their curriculum to two years. President Jordan of Stanford gave a similar sense of the situation in 1903; he felt that the colleges would disappear in fact if not in name, either becoming two-year academies, or, for the best colleges, becoming universities in all but name. In fact, from 1900 to 1930, the number of students at Liberal Arts colleges went up, mainly it would seem as the result of demographics; but, at the same time, both Presidents’ sense of the future came to pass, as the students ceased to take Liberal Arts degrees. As Reeves gives the figures, the proportion of students at Liberal Arts colleges enrolling in junior and senior years (that is staying on for third and fourth years) fell to under a third of the total, and a very much smaller number than that studied Liberal Arts degrees in universities. What had basically happened during this time, it would seem, is that education became increasingly *vocational* in its nature. (Even the Liberal Arts programmes, in effect, became vocational degrees; Reeves figures suggest that the majority of the students who still continued to study Liberal Arts degrees in their senior years did so because they hoped to become teachers or, after graduate studies, professors. They studied their subject, in other words, in order to teach it.)<sup>13)</sup> At the same time, and as a related trend, the American university system, like the British, saw an increasing specialization, as the German model of the research university was increasingly adopted there also. This model, some would argue, has an innate tendency to remove academic staff’s priorities from the teaching of undergraduates, as, if they wish to advance in their own careers, the academics’ priorities must be in the direction of producing scholarship for ‘professional’ audiences.

To digress a little, English Higher Education probably now demonstrates the culmination of this tendency. With the coming of the Research Assessment Exercise in the 1989 (now the REF — Research Excellence Framework), every department which wished to receive

---

12) *ibid.*, p.375.

13) *ibid.*, pp.376-377.

research funding from the government had to submit the work of its academic staff to peer review. In the most recent assessment (2008), this meant that four pieces of work from each member of staff was submitted to a rather small panel of experts, who then had to read through all of these books or articles (a task which might well qualify for the generally overused epithet 'soul-destroying'), and rank them on a four point scale, from 'world class' to 'national interest.' The overall score of the department, a kind of GPA, was then fed into an equation which calculated the amount of money the department would receive from the government's overall pot. More nebulously, the GPAs were published as a kind of league table of excellence. It is clear that this system has increased the productivity of English academics — though the value of what is being produced is sometimes open to question. But, while most people have reservations about the system, and some have very deep reservations, it is the only game in town; and if you do not publish, your department perishes. This has produced plenty of unedifying sights. Departments turn on their less productive colleagues, whatever else their contributions to the intellectual community may be, and find ways of 'removing' them. Vice-chancellors advise departments that their problems stem from the fact they are giving their undergraduates 'Mercedes-class' teaching when they should be giving them teaching which was more 'Ford-class.'

Efforts to counter such publication-bias have been made. Assessments of teaching quality have been introduced, via the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 1993, and the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) which replaced the QAA in 1997. Both QAA and TQA were aimed at ensuring the processes of teaching were up to standard. Teams of academics began week-long visits to one another's departments. Generally, all departments emerged well from the examination, and there was no observable impact on publication-bias. The *National Student Survey* introduced in 2005 had a greater impact. This survey gave every student the opportunity to rate their undergraduate experience in a national poll which fed into another set of league tables. Questions were asked about the quality of: teaching; assessment and feedback; academic support;

organization and management; learning resources; and opportunities for personal development. There was also a final question asking for the students' sense of their 'overall satisfaction.' These were sensible questions, and the exercise was an interesting one. Quite what the league tables show is another matter, but, after the first couple of years, it was clear that the *National Student Survey* was important. Here was another way in which potential students could measure a university's reputation. Vice-chancellors were now more likely to make statements about the need for all students to have 'Rolls Royce-class' teaching, while at the same time departments, usually with less not more resources to deliver such an education, explored ways of managing students' expectations and 'educating' students in the importance of filling out the survey 'accurately.'

What has been demonstrated, in fact, over the last 20 years in English academia, is the remarkable effect of league tables and benchmarking, when those two processes are linked to money. One can argue that many of those effects have been destructive; yet, one also has to recognize that these systems of work management may have been effective in making academics more productive. In various lists of the best-universities-in-the-world type, UK universities do disproportionately well. In the QS World University Ranking 2010 4 of the top 7 universities were British (in 2009 it was 4 of the top 6). When the amount of funding British universities receive is factored in, this is a remarkable achievement. To what extent it is the result of the benchmarking systems cannot be known, but it seems a reasonable assumption that the measurements and competition on a national scale have helped the performance in similar measurements and competition on international scales. It has certainly removed any sense of complacency, even of comfort, within academia.

To return to America. There were, from the early 1900s onwards, powerful trends within the university system towards academic specialism and student vocationalism. Given those trends, it is hard to see how Liberal Arts Education could survive, and it seems that, as originally envisaged, it has not. Michael Lind, in an article from 2006, reports that only 3 percent of American undergraduates were choosing to major in the

Liberal Arts. This is noted in sorrow; the title of the article is the elegiac 'Why the Liberal Arts Still Matter.'<sup>14)</sup> All of which suggests to me that statements such as 'Liberal Arts degrees are particularly well established in the USA' need to be scrutinized rather carefully.

### **The Liberal Arts and Folly**

I have failed, so far, to find a well-grounded or flourishing Liberal Arts Education at all — either in England or America. Rather, the story seems to have been a similar one in both countries, where a Liberal Arts Education faded away under the impact of the German model of the research university, though it did so considerably more slowly in America. I do not think though, that the fading of the Liberal Arts degree is quite the same thing as the fading of the influence of the Liberal Arts. The Liberal Arts still play a large and important role within society — both for good reasons and ill. I want to give my sense of why this is, initially through another anecdote, this time from the time of my second return from Japan. On my arrival back in Bristol from ICU in 2006 (I had been teaching at ICU for two very enjoyable years), perhaps as a punishment for having been away, I was appointed Head of Education in the Department of English. As part of that role, it was my duty to give the welcoming address to the incoming students.

Students arriving at university have to make many changes. One such is the realization that they are now, in all likelihood, small fish in a big pond, where once they were big fish in small ponds. In other words, most students coming to university find they are no longer the best in their

---

14) Michael Lind, 'Why the Liberal Arts Still Matter,' *The Wilson Quarterly* (2006), pp.52-58 (p.57). Lind does not give the source of his figures, but his figure agrees with that of the National Center for Education Statistics. Looking at Bachelor degrees, a figure of 2.9% for 'Liberal arts and sciences, general studies and the humanities' is given. To that, though, might be added another 7.9% for majors in a Liberal Arts discipline. See [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/2009menu\\_tables.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/2009menu_tables.asp), Table 287. The position is quite different for Associate degrees. There the 'Liberal arts and sciences' category alone accounts for 34%. See Table 284.

cohort. This often feels to them as if they are suddenly less able. In an attempt to counteract that, my address began by my stressing the achievement that reaching this level of competition, or size of pond, represented. I would tell the students (some 66% or more of whom are female, a ratio which reflects the ratio of students who take 'A'-level English) how there had been about 20 applicants for each of their places. I would then tell them where I thought they had come to: that this department of English was a department that had no core curriculum, though it maintained a requirement of chronological coverage; that this was a department that had no standard critical line or methodology, though, of course, we expected our students to demonstrate standard qualities in their work, such as knowledge, argument, expression, judgement; above all, I would tell them, I hoped that this was a department that fostered an intelligent and responsible *scepticism*, that is a willingness to question received opinion after one had done one's best to understand and recognize the importance of received opinion.

My example of such a scepticism was Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1511). In that book, Erasmus, as the title suggests, praises folly, without which, he argues, our lives would not be possible. Who but a fool, Erasmus asks, would get married, and put his or her head into the 'noose of wedlock,' knowing from the experience of others the ocean of troubles and difficulties that awaited? What woman, who was not foolish, would desire the pains and life-threatening dangers of child-birth? Who, whether a man or woman, would anyway want the constant trouble and expense that children bring, children who, in the end, always betray their parents by leaving them to put their own heads into new 'noose[s] of wedlock,' and so, in making their own new families, create troubles for themselves in turn? Life can seem a rather depressing cycle of troubles, particularly in its end, though, thankfully, as Age brings sickness and other horrors, it also brings the still greater foolishness of a second childhood, as our mental capacities fail. Erasmus's work is a witty tour-de-force on why it is folly that both makes us human, and allows us to endure being human. His praise of folly is, in part, a refusal to simply accept the world as given, and

an invitation to the reader to re-examine the often unexamined customs and conventions of society. He does this not by being fantastical or irrational, but rather by being unusually rational. In doing so, he exposes the limits of rational argument. Love may be folly if considered in strictly rational terms; but who would be such a fool as to consider love so? Self-sacrifice might be similarly difficult to justify rationally, but a willingness to sacrifice oneself is a large part of what we believe it means to be properly human. Erasmus's praise of folly is, in the end, genuine, because it is a praise, among other things, of our love for others, and a critique of the types of thought which we would now label utilitarian. (Standing behind Erasmus's arguments, of course, is the example of divine love and, in particular, the belief that Christ's sacrifice of himself for others should be a model of our own sacrifices for others.) For Erasmus, and he hopes for his readers, society makes little sense, or an impoverished sense, when viewed in strictly rationalist and utilitarian terms. Human society is a network of loving relationships, in which love is a transformative power. Love, folly, and grace are all closely related for Erasmus.

It is that notion of the 'transformative' that I emphasized in my welcoming address. *In Praise of Folly* shows Erasmus playing with ideas, to a serious end. Such play, I told the students, was what I particularly liked about my own period of literature, the Renaissance. There is, in the great literature of that period, a strong sense that the world is not given, but rather that it is to a large extent what we make of it, whether that be a charnel house or a place of comfort. There is the sense that the world can be re-imagined, that it does not need to be as it is. Works of literature, at least the kind that last, tend to display such a serious playfulness, a recognition that they have an argument with society, both about how it is, and how it has been, and how it might be. And such a serious playfulness, or intelligent scepticism, is one of the great lessons, I believe, that the study of literature may help us to understand. Indeed, I would argue that it was central to what universities are about. I finished with a quotation from Clive James, in which he recalled his own experience of university:

But it is, or should be, in the nature of a great university to provide an unwritten charter by which a no-hoper may fool around more constructively than he realizes, largely by keeping company with fellow students who are working harder than he is.<sup>15)</sup>

Now, I hope my address was not the cause of various of the English students becoming 'no hoppers' as opposed to constructive fools. Looking back, I think I chose to talk about folly and serious play for two reasons: in part because I knew the previous address, by the Dean, was likely to concentrate on practicalities, emphasizing that the £3,000 a year tuition fees were a bargain compared to North American universities (£3,000 is now a rather quaint and nostalgic sum, with the announcement of fees of up to £9,000 this autumn in the *Browne Report*); and, more importantly, because I wanted to suggest the continuities I saw in Erasmus's work, and the European renaissance, with the study of English literature today, and the notion of what a university is, or should be.

I wanted to suggest, in other words, that this course at this university, English literature at the University of Bristol, was part of an ongoing project which was of central value to my culture. By stressing the playful nature of this course, I wanted to suggest that it had no end in its sights. By stressing the seriousness of such play, I wanted to suggest the larger implications of the course for those taking it and for society as a whole. Like Erasmus, the playful are not in any simple way conformist or normative; but neither are they suspicious. An intelligent scepticism is not intrinsically 'nay-saying' but rather asking of reasons, while being well aware of the limits of reason and the rational in providing such reasons. Above all, such courses, and such people, are not utilitarian in orientation — they might, indeed, be seen more accurately as anti-utilitarian by habit, or resistant to the strictly utilitarian frame of mind. I realize now that, to an extent, I saw an English literature education as developing individuals

---

15) Clive James, 'How the Australian Painters Came Home,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 Sep 2006.

towards many of the same ends as a Liberal Arts Education.

Such an attitude is more than simply a kind of academic 'land grab' — or, as a land grab, it has a considerable historical precedent. Michael Lind argues that Liberal Arts programmes survived as long as they did in America thanks to two factors: Charles Norton's decision in the early 1900s that Harvard's professional schools would only allow entry to those who already had an undergraduate degree (in some ways an unjust and elitist decision in its effects); and the development of 'Western Civ' courses from the ruins of classical studies. The latter allowed Liberal Arts programmes, shorn of rhetoric in its classical senses, and with politics and economics removed, to refashion themselves as literature courses, based around both classic texts in translation, and classic texts in English. Something similar happened within English Higher Education. As classics-based degrees lost their cultural importance, while figures such as Lindsay developed deliberately equivalent degrees such as PPE, English literature largely took their place by a kind of cultural *fiat*. In the mid-twentieth century, English literature had attained an acknowledged cultural centrality, not seen before or since. Its spokesman — R.P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, I.A. Richards — spoke to the nation, and in particular they spoke against some of its dominant tendencies. Collini, précising John Guillory in part, argues that 'the ideological efficacy of the New Criticism resided not in the politically and culturally conservative *views* of the individual critics, but in their promotion of the idea of 'complex form' as itself *adversarial* to the dominant instrumental culture.' 'Complex form' is here a shorthand for 'the formal unity that is a fully realized work of literature.' The work of art was seen to function so as to 'to reproach the partial and the mechanical, and thus to trump the merely propositional language characteristic of both liberal utilitarianism and science.' Literature itself spoke out against specialism and the professional idiom, demanding of its readers an engagement with the whole of life. Those who taught or studied it were not to be specialists but intellectuals, capable of a general

engagement with culture, in a public and attractive manner.<sup>16)</sup>

### **The Liberal Arts Society?**

I have, then, come upon two arguments for the closeness of the relationship between a Liberal Arts Education and English literature. One, historical and disciplinary, relies on a particular, and particularly successful, notion of the work of art as itself standing for and offering an example of a kind of thinking as a set of values, which thinking and values might be associated with the Liberal Arts; and another, present and pedagogical, which relies on the notion of a playful scepticism taught in part by the study of books. Neither, I think, needs necessarily to be focused on English literature though, as it has happened in England and America, it was. What both suggest, I think, is that the habits of mind associated with the study of the Liberal Arts are much more culturally important, and valued, than the absence of Liberal Arts programmes suggest.

That absence itself needs some qualification. In America, as Lind notes, only 3% of undergraduate bachelor students major in the Liberal Arts. That is true, but one might also add to this, if one was interested in the presence of Liberal Arts in American society, that another 8% take a major in a Liberal Arts discipline. The situation is almost identical to that in England, where, though there are effectively no students studying the Liberal Arts as a degree, some 11% of students are taking degrees in a Liberal Arts discipline.<sup>17)</sup> In both countries, then, about 1 in 10 graduates have a Liberal Arts background. But the situation becomes healthier still for Liberal Arts disciplines when one looks at individual universities. Taking this year's figures at my University as my English example, just

---

16) Stefan Collini, 'The Completest Mode: The Literary Critic as Hero,' in *The Common Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.257-267, p.262.

17) The figures come from HESA's *Students in Higher Education Institutions 2003/4*, Table 1, available at <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/1906/251/>. For the American picture, one might want to add in those taking Associate degrees, in which case the number of students studying Liberal Arts disciplines goes up to 19%. See note 13 above.

over 20% of students are taking degrees in the Faculty of Arts. Moreover, if one looks at total applications made to take those degrees, the percentage rises to some 25%, or 9,000 applications out of 35,000, for roughly 2,500 places. The situation is remarkably similar at Harvard (to choose a rather grand example), with around 25% of students taking degrees in the equivalent of the Faculty of Arts.<sup>18)</sup>

I find this commitment to the disciplines of the Liberal Arts pleasing, and a little surprising, particularly in the case of North America — to an extent it allays my fears of the changes that the introduction of substantial tuition fees in English education may threaten. What, though, of the greater preponderance of students taking such degrees in institutions such as Harvard and Bristol? Why do institutions at the 'elite' end of Higher Education have a significantly greater commitment to Liberal Arts disciplines? What does this indicate? A cynical argument might run along the lines that the Liberal Arts thrive at such institutions because students wish to gain access to prestigious institutions through easier routes than the 'harder' sciences. There are reasons, such as the application rate, to dismiss such arguments, but allowing it to stand, one still has to ask, in that case, what it is that the students think the degrees from those institutions give them. In the case of students in England, and I presume in America, the most obvious and plausible answer is that they think they are gaining access to better and more interesting jobs, and this is, generally a correct perception. Most English graduates go into careers unrelated to their degree.<sup>19)</sup> This is only possible, of course, if the employers believe that an arts degree is valuable. I wrote to a lawyer at one of the 'golden circle' law firms in London asking if English graduates made good lawyers. He sent me a one-line reply: 'Is Bismark a herring?' A quick search of Wikipedia revealed that Bismark is indeed a type of herring, a kind of dish

---

18) The figures come from the Harvard factbook, available at: [http://www.provost.harvard.edu/institutional\\_research/factbook.php](http://www.provost.harvard.edu/institutional_research/factbook.php).

19) For statistics see [http://www.prospects.ac.uk/what\\_do\\_graduates\\_do\\_english.htm](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/what_do_graduates_do_english.htm).

similar to a roll-mop herring, and a favourite of the famous German chancellor. In other words, 'yes.' Half of the senior partners at the firm, in fact, had arts degrees.

### **The Examined Essay**

That this should be so is not obvious. Why should English companies (and American companies) still be willing to accept Liberal Arts degrees as the equal of other, more vocational degrees? I wonder if it has something to do with what first occurred to me in my marking of entrance examination papers at Japan Women's University — the centrality of the essay to the English Liberal Arts Education, and especially English Literature. The essay has a long history, which is usually seen as originating with Michael Montaigne in France and Francis Bacon in England. What is less known is its history as a form of examination, which is somewhat more recent. The essay, as Peter Womack gives this history, became important when it was used in the entrance examinations for the British Civil Service in India from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.<sup>20)</sup> The great public schools then started teaching towards this exercise, and the essay became the gold standard of examinations in the humanities, crowding out summary, paraphrase, and commentary. What the candidate for a place in the Civil Service was asked to demonstrate in an essay was that he or she had undergone a process of acculturation into an in-group — in other words that they were able to write in a manner which showed they had internalized the conventions and commonplace knowledge of a group, but at the same time were able to write in a manner within those conventions that had its own distinctive characteristics. The candidate could speak in a recognizable 'language' in their own distinctive voice.

This is a challenging task to pull off, in part because it has an inherent tendency towards plagiarism. Montaigne had noted this in describing how the process of education allows a person to talk and write on the important

---

20) Peter Womack, 'What Are Essays For?' in *English in Education* 27: 2 (1993), pp.42-49.

common topics: 'The bees do here and there suck this, and cull that flower, but afterward they produce the honey, which is peculiarly their own — then it is no more thyme or marjoram.'<sup>21)</sup> (The point is made particularly elegantly, as Montaigne is here drawing directly on Seneca's *Letter 84*.) This makes, of course, the essay a deeply problematic form as a means of examination, because there is the constant risk that the student will not produce the honey, that is the distinctive voice, the felt personality that animates and orders the discussion, but will merely place the flowers, the thyme and marjoram in a different order. Not only, then, is the essay hard to mark, but it also pedagogically worrisome.

Why, then, are all these problems overlooked, and the essay made central? The answer, I think, is the same answer as to why one would not use the essay: subjectivity — or rather, a certain kind of subjectivity. The risks of the essay are put up with because English culture — or English ruling culture — believes in a certain kind of response, a written voice which reflects the easy and deft movements of a mind over a range of material, showing itself capable of recognizing the telling detail, and able to deploy that detail in an elegant and persuasive manner. It is not enough to know a subject; what matters as much is the way that that knowledge is carried. We are looking, I would suggest, for a form of what the Renaissance would have called *sprezzatura*, or, as the Indian Civil Service might have put it, a gentlemanly style. With my use of 'gentlemanly style' here I am invoking Cain's and Hopkins's account of the British empire, *British Imperialism, 1688-1990*, which saw the British empire as driven by what they term 'gentlemanly capitalism,' whose main dynamic was 'the drive to create an international trading system centred on London and mediated by sterling':

World trade was to be financed by short-term credits (principally bills on London); world development was to be promoted initially by long-term loans to foreign governments and subsequently through

---

21) Michel de Montaigne, 'Of Education,' in *Essays* (1580; 1st edn).

direct overseas investments. The whole package was to be tied together by a regime of international free trade, which would encourage specialisation, cut transaction costs and create an interlocking system of multilateral payments. The resulting expansion of global commerce was to be handled, transported and insured by British firms. British manufactured exports were a very visible part of this panorama, but the design was not drawn by industrialists and, as we have already noted, their interests were not paramount.<sup>22)</sup>

This, then, is an account of British history that sees bankers and financiers as playing the key role in Britain's commercial relations. These are the gentlemen who drove gentlemanly capitalism, and who saw to it that the political state favoured their ends and purposes, and not those of others, such as the manufacturers. Cain's and Hopkins's account appeals to me because it seems accurately to represent the more recent history as I recognize that. In Britain, manufacturers have always been allowed to go bankrupt, or be taken over — the state generally does not intervene. It was a very long time ago that the sense of the country as the workshop of the world disappeared. Yet, quite remarkably, London as a financial centre remains pre-eminent. Not, perhaps, as powerful as New York, but powerful out of all proportion to the country's industrial base. And, crucially, the sorts of people who run the financial firms, and the law firms that service that financial industry, accept the importance of degrees in subjects that constitute the Liberal Arts. That, I believe, is the key fact that explains the continued and remarkable popularity of the Liberal Arts subjects, if not a Liberal Arts programme, in England. As long as a degree in English is a means to become a part of the gentlemanly elite, it will remain popular; and I imagine that is true in America, as well. (Both countries, at the least, have been far more willing to save Wall Street than Main Street, even if

---

22) P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-1990*, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1993), vol I, p.44.

American manufacturing is in better health than British manufacturing.)

I phrase that rather polemically, in order to point up the historical fact that Liberal Arts education has always been the badge of and barrier to the ruling class. Edward Royle has a definition of the nineteenth-century English gentleman which makes this point nicely. Such a gentleman was male, wealthy, had a natural moral superiority, and was used to command:

His largeness of mind and generosity of spirit were based upon a classical education. He was a man of leisure, an amateur capable of detachment and philosophical reflection. He was instantly recognisable as someone at ease with the world, civilised, urbane, cultured, cosmopolitan and public-spirited. He liked to think of himself as a patrician in Cicero's Rome [... Such men] became rulers, not through ambition, but through duty and commitment to public service. If they worked hard, they liked not to show it.<sup>23)</sup>

What are the Liberal Arts? Etymologically and historically, they are not, of course, arts which are liberal, but rather the arts which befit free men, that is, as Lind points out, the men who, in classical times, governed their countries, as opposed to the slave populations who did a great deal of the work in those countries. The Liberal Arts are the arts of the patricians in Cicero's Rome: the arts which demonstrated that one was a member of that patrician class, at the same time as they fitted one out to be a member of that class. They were a form of cultural capital, and so a way of excluding those who had not the finances or time to acquire them. One might, then, worry not about the loss of the Liberal Arts, but about their surprising resilience, suggesting, as it does, that part of the role of education is to perpetuate the power of the dominant ruling class. The question of whether the survival of the Liberal Arts is an altogether good thing is a genuine one.

It is reasonable to say that, in England, the government is no longer

---

23) Edward Royle, *Modern Britain* (London: Edwin Arnold, 1987), p.396.

willing to support the Liberal Arts, though that is not because it has any worries about the uses of cultural capital or the perpetuation of the ruling classes. The government has come to see, and has come to be increasingly willing to state, that the role of publicly funded education is to increase the economic vigour of society as a whole. (The *US Department of Education Strategic Plan for 2002-7* takes a similar position.) This is not unreasonable; in spending other people's money, utilitarianism — even if it is a crude kind of utilitarianism — is hard to argue against. What has been happening over the last ten years in particular is the favouring of STEM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics) subjects. This has happened in a variety of ways. Two or three years ago the government decided that it would pay the universities a little bit more than before to teach students of STEM subjects, by paying the universities a little bit less for arts students; there was no cut in the money going into education, then, but rather the same loaf of bread was being sliced differently. More recently, the government started to offer matching grants; if an institution invests a million pounds in its faculty of arts, that is fine; if they invest it in a STEM subject the government will match that million pounds with another million of its own. The government, that is, has been intent on increasing the biases within Higher Education that favour the provision of subjects which it sees to be most clearly in the national good. Most recently, in the light of the *Browne Report's* (2010) recommendations, the government has drastically reduced its 'subsidy' of arts subjects, while maintaining it for science subjects. (The position is not a wholesale removal of funding as is often said: the government will implicitly be supporting the arts subjects by the fact that it is extending loans to those studying arts subjects, given that it expects to lose 25% of the money it so extends.) There is a question, of course, as to whether or not the government knows what is in the national good, or its British history. If analyses such as Cain's and Hopkins's are correct, it may be that more of the 'gentlemanly capitalists' are needed, as opposed to less. The head of the London School of Economics put this point quite trenchantly this July, in an interview with the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. He described the focus on STEM

as “economically irrational” given that the market was demanding graduates in areas such as finance, media and law. Nevertheless, I imagine that the government will succeed in this reshaping. English universities are independent institutions, but only nominally so. The government, as the monopoly supplier of students and funding, effectively shapes their policy. This seems to me, though not to most of my colleagues, a very worrisome situation.

It is not tuition fees per se, as the example provided by America would seem to suggest, that threaten the Liberal Arts. My fear, in the context of English Higher Education, is of government policy; that may well damage the Liberal Arts, if it continues actively and implicitly to deprecate Liberal Arts in terms of its favouring of other subjects. Tuition fees, in fact, provide one of the few glimmers of hope. With the *Browne Report* (2010) and the coming of tuition fees proper, universities will gain a far larger income stream which is independent of the government. (That independence, however, needs qualification, as it will be the government which is providing the individual students with the loans.) With that greater financial independence may come a greater independence of action, and perhaps even a greater academic independence.

I hope that happens, for I think the survival of the Liberal Arts in general, and English Literature in particular, is a good thing, even allowing for the fact that the history of the role of Liberal Arts in society has its darker aspects. I believe in the project started by the group of scholars and educators that we came to call the Renaissance humanists. The Liberal Arts may have been the arts of a citizen elite, and in part a means of constructing that elite and maintaining its privileges. At the same time, within the Liberal Arts, and so within that elite, there was a disciplinary propensity to liberal thinking, itself a part and parcel of the scepticism I was referring to earlier. To take one example, the exercise of arguing *in ultraque parte*, arguing for and against a position, was a common part of rhetorical training, and rhetoric was one of the key Liberal Arts. It was an exercise derived from the law courts of Athens and Rome, and clearly bound up with the interests of privileged classes. It was also, though, part

of an education which, through the vagaries of history, Cicero and Shakespeare both shared. *In ultraque parte*, for Shakespeare, has been argued to have shaped his ability to give both sides of an argument so perfectly that audiences and readers cannot say what Shakespeare's own beliefs were.<sup>24)</sup> Whether or not that account of Shakespeare's negative capability, or multiplicity, or whatever one wishes to call it, is true, it is certain that Shakespeare's plays, though they do not share our liberal values, have a liberalism of argument. So, to take *The Merchant of Venice* as my example, that play asks us to see Shylock both from the perspective of the Venetian Christian, from which perspective the Jew is a cur, and from Shylock's perspective, from which the Christians are remarkable for their hypocrisy and cant.

The most perfect generic embodiment of this movement of the mind is found in Montaigne's *Essais*. The essay itself becomes the form for a kind of personal and provisional thinking, in which, if he or she is careful, the writer comes upon him or herself, as it were glimpsed out of the corner of an eye. In 'Of Repenting,' Montaigne reflects on that process, noting that he 'cannot settle my object,' by which he means something akin to 'himself':

It goes so unquietly and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I take it in this plight, as it is at the instant I amuse myself about it. I describe not the essence, but the passage; not a passage from age to age, or as the people reckon, from seven years to seven, but from day to day, from minute to minute... Were my mind settled, I would not essay, but resolve myself.<sup>25)</sup>

This is a kind of thinking which leads not to a reductive certainty, or a compiling of known facts, but rather to a sense of the variousness of the world, and an ever greater sense of how categories, while necessary to

---

24) See Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

25) From the translation by John Florio (1603), modernized.

action and understanding, always tend to misrepresent as they clarify. Above all, I believe, this thinking leads to a cautious humility, and an awareness of the human nature out of which come our semi-permanent and seemingly objective customs and conventions, and so of an awareness not only of their fictiveness and fragility, but of their dangers and importance.

Above all, I would like to claim, this is a kind of thinking which argues against crude utilitarianism, or utopianism. In its sense of mystery (a mystery that comes about from a consideration of unmanageable plenitude, not a mystery that comes about from the unwillingness to think), it is very protective of humanity, and the individual. Students' essays are not Montaignesque essays, but they are related. The essay, at its best, is always, in part, a creative prose form, and one of the things it is partially creative of is identity — which, by the bye, is another of its pedagogical problems. Students more often suffer from writer's block when writing essays, than they do when writing reviews, summaries or examination responses, because they realize that they are more involved in a form of self-exposure. To be judged on one's essay is a peculiarly personal judgement. The hope is that the benefits outweigh the problems.

### **Man, The Unknown**

In this paper, as I have gone along, I have implicitly suggested that a Liberal Arts degree is not necessary to a Liberal Arts Education, that is, that one can gain the general responsiveness and attentiveness to human life and society that the proponents claim for Liberal Arts degrees by studying English literature, or literature, or any humanities subject alone. In closing I would like to go further. I would suggest that a Liberal Arts degree, by which I mean a generalist degree, including, at the least, the Social Sciences alongside the Humanities, is not only not desirable, but also incoherent. For it seems to me that, in some important ways, that the Social Sciences are the enemies of the Humanities or Liberal Arts. (I am also aware that the Social Sciences are much more diverse and complex than I am describing them here.) It was the Social Sciences which, in effect, replaced

the study of English as the most culturally influential body of disciplines in the later twentieth century. So, to return to the example of the Director of the London School of Economics, having criticized the government for misreading the shape of the economy, he turned to defend not the Arts but the Social Sciences 'We are in danger of having a university policy that pretends the economy is a different shape than it is. If we distort our public investment to starve the social sciences, this is actually an own goal.' Or, to offer a more numerical example, while undergraduate numbers between the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Social Sciences are more or less equal in my university, the number of postgraduates, which is far more dependent on government funding, is overwhelmingly in favour of the Social Sciences, to a ratio of about 3.5:1.

The Social Sciences were able to do this in large part because they were consistently more able to hold the ear of government, and they were able to do that because they were able to talk a language of metrics and management. They promised government a means of measurement and control of human society which was antithetical to the aspects of the humanities which are to me the most valuable. Most perniciously, they suggested that humane values — the need to look after the weak, the importance of education, the desire to eradicate poverty — were values that could, and should, be argued for primarily on utilitarian grounds. Poverty was an economic cost at least as much as a moral problem; education was an economic benefit, not a moral good to be desired; and so on. Yet utilitarian arguments are deeply problematic. What happens if the new disciplines of neuroscience and neurobiology demonstrate that the propensity to violence is very largely the result of inheritance and biology? It may well be, in a utilitarian world, that it no longer makes sense to attempt to nurture and educate those with such dispositions to play full and non-violent parts within society. And such situations are more than hypothetical.

*Man, The Unknown* is a book from 1935, written by Alexis Carrel, a French surgeon who had won the Nobel prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1912. The book was a great success across Europe; it is also unacceptable

to modern eyes, for in its analysis of the present state of modern society it promotes various eugenic projects, linking these with rule by an intellectual elite. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., who had enjoyed it, sent a copy to Rudyard Kipling. Kipling, not at all a liberal in his political views, found it interesting, but could not assent to its programme. It was the sense of the unknowableness of people, and so of their potential, which saved him. On the day on which he wrote his will (he would die a few weeks later), he wrote a letter of reply to Roosevelt:

Now I've read *Man, the Unknown* — and more than once. It is enormously interesting but — don't you think that in the end he re-establishes that fact that Man is Unknown — as unknown as the internal combustion engine, every detail of which is explicable except the nature of the Spark that causes the mixture to explode? So it may be with us.<sup>26)</sup>

An education in the Liberal Arts, whether in one or more disciplines, might not make us liberal in our values, *per se*, as the example of Kipling shows, but it would, I hope, teach just such an intelligent and humane scepticism as Kipling demonstrated to the end of his life, and which might, as in this particular case, allow us to resist utilitarian shortcuts — whether of the bad science of early eugenics or the better science that is to come. To do so, such a Liberal Arts education must be willing to resist strongly those forces which threaten to narrow, simplify, or reduce our thinking about our culture and ourselves. This means, I believe, it must set itself against some of the arguments and tendencies of some other disciplines; a Liberal Arts Education cannot be, in any simple way, a Liberal Education. It also means resisting similar tendencies within its larger society, as one of its key services to that society. I hear very little such statements of purpose in British universities. I was very glad to see, as I read once again ICU's

---

26) Thomas Pinney, *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling*, 6 vols (London: Macmillan, 1990-2003).

statement of its three core commitments, that the same was not true everywhere, or at least in one part of Japan: as it states in the first paragraph of its first commitment, 'We have that responsibility to defend our academic community from external constraint and coercion.'

**Abstract**

The paper offers some thoughts on the history and role of Liberal Arts Education in English Higher Education and, to a lesser extent and by way of comparison, in American four-year university and college education. It suggests that the Liberal Arts are in surprisingly good health, thanks to their continued appeal to a governing and privileged elite. At the same time it sees the Liberal Arts cultural importance as residing in their promotion of a humane scepticism which is generally adversarial to some of the main utilitarian and technocratic currents of the day, and suggests that the essay is the key pedagogic form by which this sceptical stance is inculcated.