THE FATE OF CULTURE

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This essay argues that there is an intrinsic link between what it sees as the contemporary predicament facing the humanities in the modern University (the fact that the humanities do not lend themselves immediately to transactional learning and to instrumental knowledge that serves the economy directly) and the effective disenfranchisement of the peoples and societies who should ‘govern’ the University in a democratic condition. It sees that the contemporary response to our predicament, in the widening of literary study to an institutionalised form of ‘Cultural Studies’, is complicit with the very barbarism that the critical study of cultural events sets out to challenge. In establishing a significantly different attitude to the concept of culture (arguing that culture is extraordinary), it proposes the initial steps in a response to such barbarism, in the search for an attitude to literature and to criticism that will extend the democratic franchise.

Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist.

I begin, then, with a beginning that is not my own, but one that I appropriate from a text written over eighty years ago, by one who has been dead for over fifty years. There will be some readers who will recognise Wittgenstein’s opening gambit in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and others who will not have done so immediately, but who will infer (now that I have mentioned it directly) that this text, from 1921, is what I am citing from above. Yet others will gain little from this new knowledge, if they are unacquainted with Wittgenstein and the *Tractatus*. Are these facts regarding the readerships for this essay significant? Would it be more significant if I had opened a poem with such a kind of allusion or direct citation? For example, is it a significant or important fact that some readers ‘hear’ Chaucer when, in 1922 or even today, they start to read Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ while others do not?
My opening tactic divides the readership into at least two groups at once. In so doing, it operates in a mode akin to the parable. In 1977, Frank Kermode explored this in a rather different context. In *The Genesis of Secrecy*, his Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard, he explained the operation of biblical parable, taking his source from Jesus as reported by Mark:

> When Jesus was asked to explain the purpose of his parables, he described them as stories *told to them without* – to outsiders – with the express purpose of concealing a mystery that was to be understood only by insiders. So Mark tells us: speaking to the Twelve, Jesus said, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but to those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven.’ (4:11-12; Kermode 1979: 2)

In the context of biblical narrative being analysed by Kermode here, the point is that there are different levels of cognition for the audience: although they all ‘see’ or ‘hear’ the same text, they do not all ‘perceive’ or ‘understand’ it. Some are excluded from its interior sense, while others have a kind of ‘access’ to it. The same, I suggest, operates in the reading of poetry, as in my allusion to Eliot; and it can also happen (as I hope it has) in the reading of criticism, such as this essay itself.

Some readers, we might venture at this point, can appropriate texts more than others; all will appropriate them variously. Some readers can give blood to the ghosts of the dead that they hear, identifying them as, for example, Chaucer or Marvell or Kyd or Middleton in Eliot; some audiences can hear the spirits of Handel or of Telemann when they are at a concert played by the Michael Nyman Band; some spectators can see Seurat in Hodgkin’s paintings, and so on. In all these cases, there will be those who remain ‘outside’ of such an appropriation, though they will still have a view on the works of art, perhaps enjoying Nyman’s ability to weave certain rock-rhythms into pieces played on instruments not normally associated with rock; or admiring the particular play of colour in Howard Hodgkin’s small canvasses, for example.

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1 Though the readership is thus divided, into those who know and those who don’t, my text here tries almost immediately to reunite them by identifying the source. It might be more precise still to identify a third group, one that would have recognised Wittgenstein had he been quoted in English translation, but who hear only an echo of the English phrase with which they are familiar, “The world is everything that is the case”, in the original German (see Wittgenstein 1992).