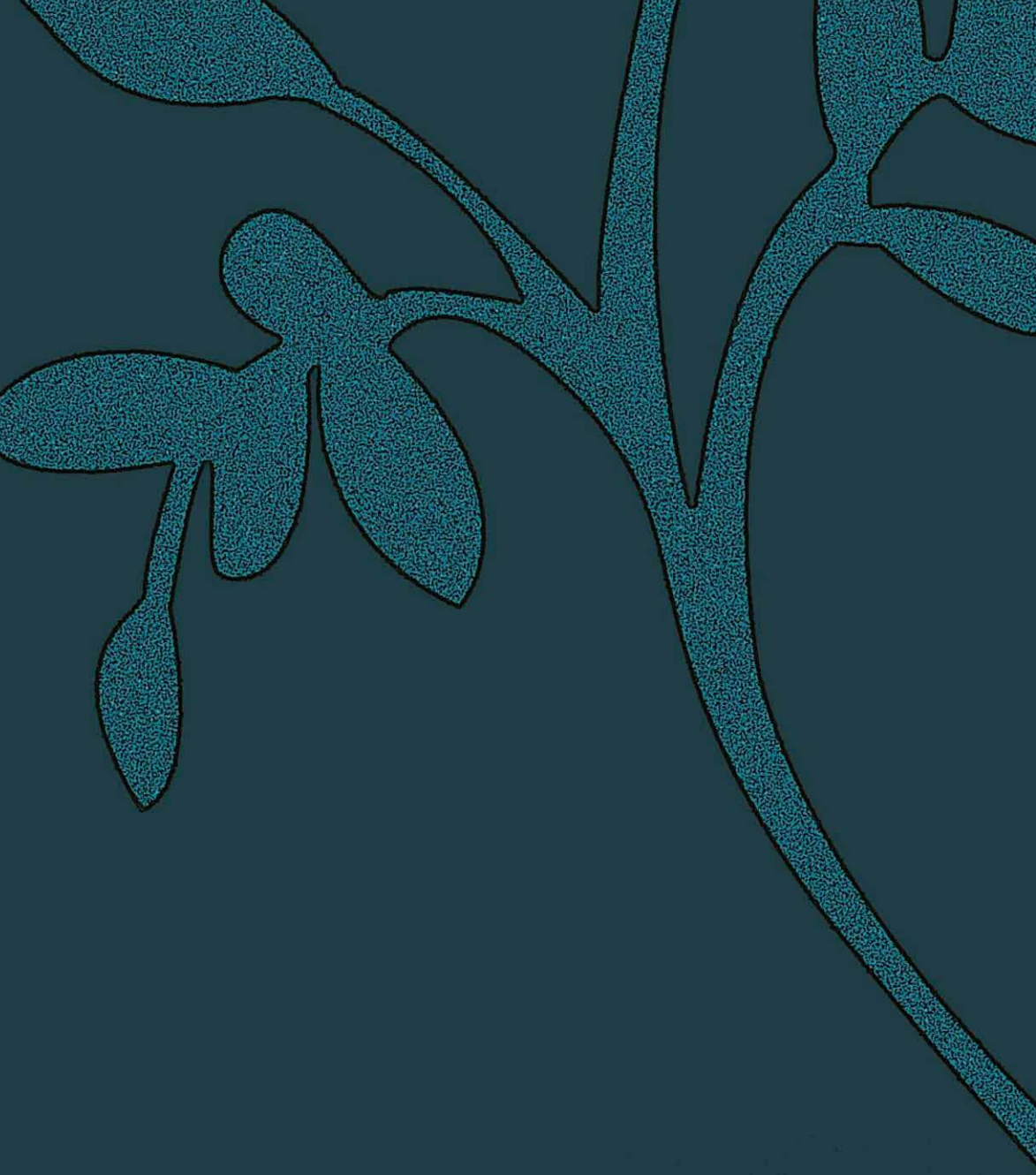
ARTICULATIONS:
poetry, philosophy and the shaping of culture

SEAMUS HEANEY

ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY
Cunningham Medal
28th January 2008

RIA



CONTENTS

PERSONS TO WHOM THE CUNNINGHAM MEDAL HAS BEEN AWARDED

1796	*Thomas Wallace*
1800	*Theophilus Swift*
1805	*William Preston*
1818	*John Brinkley*
1828	*John D'Alton*
1830	*George Petrie*
1833	*George Petrie*
1834	*William Rowan Hamilton*
1838	*James MacCullagh*
1839	*James Apjohn*
	George Petrie
1843	*Robert Kane*
1848	*Sir William Rowan Hamilton*
	Samuel Haughton
	Edward Hincks
	John O'Donovan
1851	*John Hewitt Jellett*
1858	*Edward J. Cooper*
	George Salmon
	Charles William Wall
	William Reeves
1862	*Humphrey Lloyd*
	Robert Mallet
	Whitley Stokes
	John Thomas Gilbert
1873	*Sir William R. Wilde*
1878	*Aquilla Smith*
	John Casey
	Edward Dowden
	George James Allman
1879	*William Archer*
	Robert Stawell Ball
1881	*Howard Grubb*
1883	*Edward Perceval Wright*
1884	*John Birmingham*
1885	*John Christian Malet*
1989	*George Francis Mitchell*
2001	*Daniel J. Bradley*
	Maurice Craig
	Bernard Crossland
	David B. Quinn
2005	*Denis L. Weaire*

THE CUNNINGHAM MEDAL— THE ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS AWARD

In 1789, Timothy Cunningham, a barrister of Gray's Inn and a writer on legal subjects, bequeathed the sum of £1,000 and his library to the Royal Irish Academy to enable it to award premiums for 'the improvement of natural knowledge and other subjects'.

Between 1796 and 1885, the Cunningham Medal was awarded thirty-five times in each of the three areas of the Academy's interest: in Science, in Polite Literature and in Antiquities. The Academy Members of great distinction who have received the Cunningham Medal over the years have greatly added to its lustre.

For almost a century, the Medal lapsed; but in 1989, the bicentenary year of Cunningham's bequest, the Academy's Council agreed to revive the Medal, awarding it in recognition of 'outstanding contributions to scholarship and to the objectives of the Academy'.

Seamus Justin Heaney, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995 and Member of the Royal Irish Academy, is the forty-third recipient of the Cunningham Medal.

The Medal itself is considered to be the finest work of William Mossop, born in Dublin in 1751. It displays on one side, the first President of the Academy, Lord Charlemont, in the uniform of the Irish Volunteers, with his name and title inscribed in Latin; and on the reverse, Hibernia, seated on pile of books and holding in her right hand a shield showing the harp and Irish crown and in her left hand a rod with the cap of liberty. In front of her are the ruins of a round tower, emblematic of antiquities, and behind, various emblems of astronomy, chemistry, engineering, music and literature. Inscribed above the figure of Hibernia is the motto VETERAS REVOCAVIT ARTES or 'She recalls the ancient arts', and below, in Latin again, 'Royal Irish Academy. Est. January 28 1786'.

A GRAND TOUR

by Paul Muldoon

for Seamus Heaney,
on his receiving the Cunningham Medal
of the Royal Irish Academy, 28 January 2008

The first Earl of Charlemont would have taken in,

or been taken in by, an Egypt

that promised nothing of Canaan,

a Turkey where they'd chipped and chopped

gold from the roofs of Constantinople,

his gentlemanly *giro* about Turin.

For though he viewed Ireland's claim as undeniable

he could hardly have foreseen such a turn

of events as your instructing us not to privilege

the School of Athens over the Academies

of whin-fen and bog-furze

or Ovid's Medusa over a flax-dam's floatage

but to entertain Rathsharkin as Rome, Toome as Tomis,

the Bann itself as the Bosphorus.


THOMAS MOORE

On the occasion of the
Award of the Cunningham Medal
of the Royal Irish Academy
28 January 2008

CITATION FOR DR SEAMUS HEANEY

by

PROFESSOR JANE CONROY
Humanities Secretary

It is a privilege, and a great—if slightly daunting—pleasure, to present Dr Seamus Heaney for the award of the Academy's Cunningham Medal.

Seamus Heaney, hailed by American poet Robert Lowell as the most important Irish poet since Yeats, and firmly established as one of the world's foremost literary voices, has always combined critical, scholarly and creative writing in a uniquely interrelated way. The Academy honours him today for *all* the strands of his writing, and in particular for his scholarship.

His complex career has taken him from his early days during World War II, on the family farm at Mossbawn, near Castledawson, Co. Derry—enjoying what he has described as a 'den-like'[1] sheltered childhood—to the very highest pinnacle of literary and critical fame. Early education was gained in the primary school of Anahorish, which, by that fact, has taken its place in the special topography of world poetry. This was followed by secondary education in St Columb's in Derry City and a degree at Queen's University Belfast.

He began to write in 1962, the year in which he met his future wife, Marie Devlin. He was soon a member of the group initially assembled in Belfast by Philip Hobsbaum, associating with other writers of the stature of Derek Mahon, Michael Longley and James Simmons. As chairman of 'the Group' after 1966, Seamus Heaney played a significant role in fostering literary activity in the North, 'publishing pamphlets of poetry by the rising generation'.[2] In the 1980s he was a founding director of the Field Day theatre company.

His career as a teacher began in 1962. After a year in St Thomas's Intermediate School in Ballymurphy, he took up a lectureship in St Joseph's College of Education from 1963 to 1966, then lectured in Queen's University Belfast from 1966 to 1972, during which time he also spent a year in the University of California, Berkeley. Then, for

three years in the early 1970s he cut himself adrift from the security of academic appointments to concentrate on writing. He returned to lecturing in 1975 in the Carysfort College of Education in Dublin. The year 1982 saw him embark on a form of trans-Atlantic academic transhumance, when Harvard secured him as Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory—a one-semester per annum appointment from which he resigned in 1996 to become Emerson poet in residence there. Concurrently, from 1989 to 1994, he held the Chair of Poetry at Oxford University. His lectures there appeared in 1995 in the highly important volume, *The redress of poetry*.[3]

Among Seamus Heaney's many literature prizes from the 1960s on are the Somerset Maugham Award; the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize; the P.E.N. Translation Prize; the *Sunday Times* Literary award; several Whitbread Awards, including one for *Beowulf* in 2000[4]—on which occasion he just pipped a Harry Potter novel; and so on. The reach of his writing beyond the English-speaking world is seen in many European and other awards. Most famously, in 1995, as the President has mentioned, he joined Yeats, Shaw and Beckett as the fourth Irish writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.[5] Recent forms of recognition have included the creation of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry in Queen's University Belfast in 2004, and the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2006 for his collection *District and Circle*.[6]

By now, he also holds more honorary doctorates than he could possibly align after his name. Even before he achieved Nobel celebrity he had accumulated 13 of them. The most recent in this continuing series has been from the University of Kentucky (2006). In 1973 he was appointed to the Arts Council in the Republic; he is a member of Aosdána; a Foreign Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters; a Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres of the French Ministry of Culture; and, since 1996, a member of the Royal Irish Academy, to name just some of his honours.

In recent decades, Seamus Heaney has used his fame to further social causes, such as UNICEF and Amnesty International, as well as to earn funding for artistic ventures and to support scholarship—typically through donating an essay, an introduction or a poem for a special edition, or as judge and lecturer for countless poetry competitions and literary conferences.

Both critically acclaimed and genuinely popular, Seamus Heaney has naturally been the focus of great scholarly activity—the next of several dozen monographs is due in February 2008, on *Seamus Heaney and medieval poetry*[7]—but it is appropriate here to draw particular attention to his *own* scholarly and critical activity. He has written of 'the challenge to be in two minds',[8] as an antidote to dangerous ideological narrowing, and it has been remarked that he

draws inspiration from two strains of literature. As he has put it himself: he lives off two humps.[9] But beyond that, his immense scholarship has allowed him to establish connections across much vaster distances than Britain and Ireland, and over great sweeps of time. What he has written of the Polish poet Milosz is equally true of himself: 'he can turn what, in lesser hands or with a lesser writer, would be a poem of personal nostalgia into a symptom of great cultural and historical change, without portentousness'.[10] Heaney has unfailingly concerned himself with 'how exactly art earns its keep in a violent time',[11] or in *any* time. As poet he has negotiated between public and private. He has also—and this is less frequently stressed—developed bridgeheads between scholarship and the directness of individual experience.

In his critical essays, Seamus Heaney has written searchingly on a wide range of poetry. In addition to his occasional essays, there have been five major volumes: *Preoccupations, The government of the tongue, The place of writing, The redress of poetry* and *Finders keepers,* which won the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism in 2003.[12] He has written on Irish, Scottish, Welsh, American and East European literature; on his contemporaries and on much earlier poets; he has written on the genres of poetry, on forms of poetry, on its uses; and above all on what he describes as:

> its abiding power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very distresses and solitudes are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being.[13]

His writing insistently tells us that human experiences are interconnected, and his profound scholarship opens doors into and through knowledge without excluding the possibility of simpler readings. His work of translation and adaptation 'give[s] a contemporary voice to earlier texts, bringing the past to bear upon contemporary concerns both personal and political'[14] and 'breathing new language into old works'.[15] Through his re-workings of classics such as *Philoctetes*, *Antigone* or Dante's *Inferno*[16] he has 'dramatized a tragic vision of Irish history',[17] and beyond that of world history in geopolitical contexts unforeseen by their creators. Eastern European writing has been a particular interest to which he returns, whether in critical writing; in tributes to Milosz, Havel, Holub and Herbert;[18] or in translations such as *Laments*, a 'Polish classic of the 16th century by Jan Kochanowski';[19] or the libretto of Janaček's song cycle *Diary of one who vanished*.[20]

One of this Academy's special concerns since its founding has been the study of Irish literature and heritage, whether Old, Medieval or Modern. Seamus Heaney's services to Irish literature have been outstanding. He has produced exceptional renditions of many Old Irish poems—rescuing some of the 'waifs and strays' of Old Irish lyric poetry, and writing with remarkable insight on its characteristics and its affinities with Japanese poetry. His translation of the anonymous twelfth-century *Buile Shuibhne* (as *Sweeney Astray*)[21] has, as a leading Celtic scholar put it, 'awakened us to the many felicities of that work, in which the holy madman Suibhne stands in for the figure of the artist and represents the choices he must make'.[22] There are also magnificent translations of poems in Modern Irish by Aoghán Ó Rathaille, Cathal Buí Mac Giolla Ghunna, and most recently Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin (in *District and Circle*).

These and other outstanding translations and adaptations, such as his rendering of *Beowulf* , another great sounding of the heroic world, and of numerous Scottish and Scots-Gaelic poets,[23] cross frontiers, make remote worlds and idioms accessible and remind us of our common state. Translation is sharing, and one striking example of the possible interchanges Seamus Heaney's translations set in motion is his adaptation of Horace's Ode I, 34—composed in the aftermath of September 11 2001 and presented in support of Art for Amnesty—with an essay and 23 translations set out in pairs of what have been termed 'languages of conflict'.[24]

This citation by no means does justice to Seamus Heaney, but it must draw to a conclusion. I am reminded of the despairing note sounded by one commentator faced with writing an introduction to one of Heaney's essays, who remarked that it was impossible to present him and by far the best thing was 'to turn the page and let Seamus Heaney speak'.

In summary, then, Seamus Heaney's extraordinary combination of creative, critical and scholarly writing and his generosity to other writers and scholars has earned enormous respect for poetry and for scholarship. For this, President and Members of the Academy, he is a most worthy recipient of the Cunningham Medal.

Notes

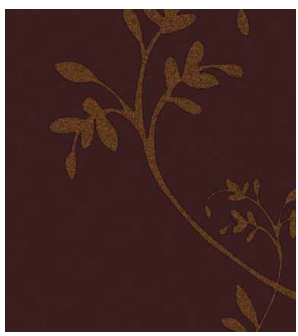
[1] Seamus Heaney, 'Crediting poetry', Nobel lecture, 7 December 1995, available at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/heaney-lecture.html [accessed 11 February 2008].
[2] Nobel Prize biography of Seamus Heaney, available at: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1995/heaney-bio.html [accessed 23 January 2008].
[3] Seamus Heaney, *The redress of poetry*, 1996, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
[4] Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: a new translation*, 2000, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
[5] 6 October 1995 was the day he received the news (on an island in the Aegean).
[6] Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle*, 2006, Faber and Faber.
[7] See note 14 below.
[8] Seamus Heaney, 'Frontiers in writing', in *The redress of poetry*.
[9] Quoted by Brian Hughes, 'Neuter allegiance: transformations of the familiar in the poetry of Seamus Heaney', in R. González and J.A. Hurtley (eds), *Hailing Heaney. Lectures for a Nineties Nobel*, 1996, Barcelona PPU, 25–40: 26.
[10] Quoted in Neil Corcoran, *The poetry of Seamus Heaney: a critical study*, 1986, Faber and Faber, 260. The passage continues: 'That move from personal lyric lament to visionary tragic lamentation: I just love the note'.
[11] Seamus Heaney, *Anything can happen: a poem and essay*, 2004, Townhouse, 12.
[12] Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: selected prose, 1968–1978*, 1980, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; *The government of the tongue: selected prose, 1978–1987*, 1990, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; *The place of writing*, 1989, Octavo; *The redress of poetry*, 1996, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; *Finders keepers*: *selected prose, 1971–2001*, 2003, Faber and Faber.
[13] Heaney, 'Crediting poetry', Nobel lecture, p. 29.
[14] Presentation by Conor McCarthy, *Seamus Heaney and medieval poetry*, forthcoming, February 2008.
[15] Cover note for *The burial at Thebes: a version of Sophocles' Antigone*, 2004, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
[16] Seamus Heaney, 'Ugolino', *Field work*, 1979, Faber and Faber; *The Cure at Troy: a version of Sophocles' Philoctetes*, 1991, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; and *The burial at Thebes*, 2004.
[17] 'Seamus Heaney', *Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th edn, 2004, Columbia University Press.
[18] See, for example, Seamus Heaney, 'In gratitude for all the gifts', *Guardian*, 11 September 2004.
[19] *Laments: Poems of Jan Kochanowski*, Stanislaw Baranczak and Seamus Heaney (translators), 1995, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
[20] Seamus Heaney, *Diary of one who vanished: a song cycle of Leos Janaček*, 1999, Faber and Faber.
[21] Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: a version from the Irish*, 1984, Faber and Faber.
[22] Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 24 January 2008.
[23] For example, his translation of Sorley MacLean (or Somhairle MacGill-Eain)'s poem 'Hallaig' (lamenting the effects of the Highland Clearances), published in *The Guardian*, 30 November 2002; and his liking for Robert Burns, see his recent tribute for Burns Night 2008, 'A birl for Burns' (highlighting the affinity between Ulster Scots and Burns's idiom), published in Andrew O'Hagan (ed.), *A night out with Robert Burns: the greatest poems*, 2008, Canongate Press.
[24] Seamus Heaney, 'Introduction', *Anything can happen*.

HOLDING PATTERNS: ARTS, LETTERS AND THE ACADEMY

DISCOURSE BY DR SEAMUS HEANEY, MRIA,

on the occasion of being awarded the Cunningham Medal

Royal Irish Academy
28 January 2008



I cannot adequately express my gratitude to the Academy for honouring me with the Cunningham Medal, or to Professsor Jane Conroy for the work she did in preparing the citation, and for the unstinted generosity which pervades it. You will understand how much your acclamation means to me, how deeply your approbation affects me. But you will also understand that it is a sobering experience to be the recipient of an award that has been bestowed only on the greatest and most learned of the Academy's members, past and present. The association of those illustrious names with the Cunningham Medal endows it with unique distinction and a specific intellectual gravity, so, as I stand here, I am acutely aware that I'm very much a latecomer basking in reflected glory—in the words of Christy Mahon, 'a middling scholar only'[1] among the giants of Irish scholarship.

Christy's description of himself would work well enough in my own case. As would the title of Padraic Colum's poem, 'A Poor Scholar of the 'Forties'—except that mine were the 1940s as opposed to the 1840s, and in the vernacular of that time and place I was called a scholar not because I was a teacher like the man in Colum's poem, but because I was, on the contrary, a pupil. And yet I would have been perfectly at home with those other nineteenth-century pupils, because in the beginning I too was a dweller in a thatched house, doing my lessons in a kitchen lit by candles and a paraffin lamp, getting my foot on the lowest rung of the learning ladder. And although I came a hundred years after the scenario imagined by Colum, I still belonged to some extent in that world where the hedge-schoolmaster introduces country children to the Latin and Greek languages. During the months before I set out to be a boarder at St Columb's College in Derry, for example, I would go in early every morning to Anahorish School for extra Latin lessons from Master Murphy. But it has to be said that Master Murphy's

qualifications as a classicist were no match for those of Colum's poor scholar, who gives a synopsis of his CV, you remember, in the opening lines of the poem:

> My eyelids red and heavy are
> From bending o'er the smouldering peat.
> I know the *Aeneid* now by heart,
> My Virgil read in cold and heat,
> In loneliness and hunger smart;
> And I know Homer too, I ween,
> As Munster poets know Ossian.[2]

Still, if Barney Murphy only got me as far as the declension of *mensa, mensa, mensam*, and the conjugation of *amo, amas, amat,* he nevertheless set me on the humanist path, and so, on this occasion when the Academy has done me the honour of choosing me as the Cunningham representative of the humanities, it seems proper to remember him.

I want, as well, to say something about the ongoing importance of the humanities as a branch of study; to proclaim in particular the extra dimension which life attains not only from the study of literature but from its composition; and to affirm, by extension, the vital necessity of ongoing research and scholarship in the domain of arts and culture. I do so because the orginal rubric concerning the award of the medal speaks of the value of contributing to 'natural knowledge', and because of my belief that poetry, which William Wordsworth once described as 'the breath and finer spirit of all knowldege,'[3] is indeed capable of making such a contribution.

So I turn now to a different poem attributed to a different Colm, but one that is pertinent to our occasion. This is a translation I did in 1997 of a twelfth-century Irish poem which purports to be by Colmcille, the one that begins 'Is scíth mo chrub o'm scriabín', the one, in fact, that the scribe Tim O'Neill wrote out a couple of years ago—fifty times on fifty calfskins—in order to raise some funds for the benefit of the Academy. In the original manuscript the poem is introduced with the words *Colmcille cecinit,* which is to say 'Colmcille sang as follows', so what we have is a little dramatic monologue, written in the voice of the saint who had lived some 600 years earlier—a lyric where the author is imagining Colmcille's weariness at the end of a long day in the *scriptorium*:

> My hand is cramped with penwork.
> My quill has a tapered point.
> Its bird-mouth issues a blue-dark
> Beetle-sparkle of ink.

Wisdom keeps welling in streams
From my fine-drawn sallow hand:
Riverrun on the vellum
Of ink from green-skinned holly.

My small runny pen keeps going
Through books, through thick and thin,
To enrich the scholars' holdings—
Penwork that cramps my hand.[4]

In so far as this is about a poet/scribe at work in the service of a monastery library, it parallels to some extent the situation of the creative writer working in an academic milieu, a situation with which I was already long and happily familiar in 1997. It is a more flattering account of that situation than the one given by an English poet when I was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford—'a pig in a bacon factory' was how I was characterised at that particular juncture—but the poem still acknowledges the distinction between scholarship and penmanship. It recognises a difference between the scholar who will study the books in the monastery's 'holdings' and the scribe who exerts himself to provide the books; but it also registers their inter-dependence. So when I did the translation in June 1997, I was not only marking the 1400th anniversity of Colmcille's death in June of the year 597; as somebody lucky enough to have been employed at Harvard to conduct classes in verse-writing, I was also recognising that I was part of an older pattern. I could see myself as a poet/penman working within the same academic enclosure as the scholar/annotator, and that analogy allowed for a momentary re-possession of the past and a gratifying understanding of my own situation in the present.

What was happening, you could therefore say, was a merging of personal memory with cultural tradition, the working out of a new perspective in the light of inherited matter. I didn't think of it like that at the time, of course—the whole process was at best half-conscious, if never without some vague autobiographical awareness. Yet the twentieth-century poet who translated the poem had learnt his Irish at a school where he experienced a monastic discipline that would have been recognisable both to the school's sixth-century patron saint and to the pseudo-Colmcille who wrote the Irish poem five or six hundred years later. We may not have used quills in the college, but we still used pen and ink, wrote in the same Old-Irish hand, and had our day organised by the ringing of bells, the saying of prayers and assemblies in the chapel. Thus, the pattern held.

Yet it wasn't just the Derry of the 1950s and the Iona of the 580s and 90s that were being compounded in the translation process. The

twelfth-century scribe whose hand was 'cramped from penwork' reminded me also of the character Shem the Penman in *Finnegans Wake*, and that connection no doubt summoned up the word 'riverrun', the first word of Joyce's multitudinous linguistic meltdown.[5] 'riverrun past Eve and Adam's', that work famously begins, but here it arrives by 'a commodious vicus of recirculation' at 'riverrun on the vellum/of ink from green skinned holly'. And I'm afraid I must further admit that I was interposing myself in the text in other ways as well, since I too had figured as a bit of a penman in the first poem of my own first book. This was the one called 'Digging', where the vocation of poetry was symbolised by the move from a world where I might have ended up handling a spade to a world where I was involved in the much lighter task of handling the pen.[6] The pattern was still holding.

All this is a very humble example of the way literary tradition and lived life reflect and amplify each other, yet it provides a fair manifestation of the way the humanities operate to inform our consciousness as a species and equip us as creatures of memory and reflection. It is easy to forget how fundamentally the holding patterns we discover in and for our experience are based on the scholar's holdings, how much we depend upon cultural memory, how it constitutes a basis for the location and different orientations of the self in the world; and it is easier still to take for granted the immemorial efforts of scribe and scholar that were necessary to keep that memory bank intact and save these intellectual and imaginative treasures for posterity.

Long before the little bud of my translation appeared on the perennial bough of the medieval Irish poem, for example, the poem had already lived several lives—and afterlives. Before I began my version, I was familiar with others by Kuno Meyer, Flann O'Brien, Padraic Fallon and Thomas Kinsella. But before Kinsella or Fallon or O'Brien or Meyer or I could address the job of construing and composing, still more fundamental work had to be done: a reliable text had to be established and a lexicon provided. I was lucky to have the use of Gerard Murphy's standard edition of *Early Irish Lyrics*,[7] but in order for Murphy to do his work there had to be a century of palaeographic and philological studies, many of them done by members of this Academy; and for centuries before that a steady process of transcription and transmission, of retention in monasteries and conservation by antiquarians, of professional librarianship and literary research.

I don't state these obvious facts in order to suggest that my twelve lines constituted some point of culmination. On the contrary, to recount the life cycle of the translation is to recap in drastically reduced terms how the humanities are constituted and how vital

they are not just to the composition of literary texts, but to the very evolution of consciousness; they provide a system of cultural and historical longitude and latitude, help you to get located in time and space, allow you to develop self-possession and even to establish a myth of yourself. I have been focusing on the literary and the Irish dimension as a form of synechdoche, but our awareness is of course informed by all that accrues consciously and unconsciously through the medium of world-wide English, World-Wide Web, world-wide media, old-world Judaeo-Christian inheritance, classical-world foundations, modern-world disjunctions, everything that delivered Aristotle to Aquinas, Virgil to Dante, Ovid to Shakespeare, Homer to Joyce, Lascaux to Picasso, Confucius to Mao, and so on and so forth, as far as one cares to go. As the critic Helen Vendler observed in her 2004 Jefferson lecture to the National Endowment for the Humanities:

> Over [our] giant earth, with its tumultuous motions, there floats every myth, every text, every picture, every system, that creators—artistic, religious, philosophical—have conferred upon it. The Delphic oracle hovers there next to Sappho, Luther's theses hang next to the Grunewald altar, China's Cold Mountain neighbours Sinai, the B-minor Mass shares space with Rabelais.
>
> If there did not exist, floating over us, all the symbolic representations that art and music, religion, philosophy, and history, have invented, and all the interpretations of them that scholarly effort has produced, what sort of people would we be? We would…be sleepwalkers, going about like automata, unconscious of the very life we are living.[8]

Or to put it another way, as it was once put to me by my late friend, the poet Joseph Brodsky: 'Human beings were put upon earth to create civilization'. Joseph, as you will understand from that boast, was more like a poetry samurai than a poetry scribe. He had a totally undoubting belief in the virtue of his calling and exemplified all of its extravagance and arrogance and wonder. His poems and proclamations were what D.H. Lawrence would have called the songs of a man who had come through. He had been exiled from the Soviet Union in 1972, after serving the preliminary years of a sentence in a Siberian work camp. His crime consisted in not having a job, in embracing the vocation of poetry without the offical sanction of the Writers Union, and in declaring—when asked at his trial where his authority as poet came from—declaring, 'I think it came from God'. Yet, out of all of this, Joseph emerged as a man

more didactic than dissenting; somebody with an absolute faith in the value of the humanities, a faith that inspired him to many pregnant, enigmatic and ultimately challenging remarks. 'Aesthetics', he would maintain, 'is the mother of ethics'. And even more confrontationally, 'If art teaches us anything, it is that the human condition is private'.

The humanities, then, are as much a faith as a discipline. When I talk about them I am more like somebody affirming a belief than somebody demonstrating a proof. This is partly because a creative writer's *modus operandi* differs significantly from a scholar's, and can be neatly described in the words of the poet John Hewitt, who once said that the artist depends mostly on 'intuitions, intimations, imaginative realizations, epiphanies';[9] but it is also partly because poetry, even the greatest poetry, has a touch of magical thinking about it. It aspires to be what Wallace Stevens called 'the supreme fiction'.[10] The poet tends to regard the composed work as a talisman of sorts, designed on the one hand, to receive and store beneficent energy and influence, and on the other hand, to fend and favour the poet, to be, in the words of Robert Frost, 'a momentary stay against confusion'.[11] Not for nothing did Roy Foster entitle the first volume of his biography of W. B. Yeats *The apprentice mage*.[12] In his youth Yeats did indeed set out to immerse himself in secret disciplines and become an initiate in occult doctrine and practice; but if we leave his interest in technical magic to one side, and consider instead the kind of authority he sought and achieved as a poet, he still figures in our imagination as a magus in his lonely tower, a neo-Platonist still defiantly at his practices in the age of enlightenment.

As such, Yeats can be cast as a representative figure of the poet in the age of science, and of the position of the creative artist within the academy. With his belief in what he called 'the half-read wisdom of daemonic images'[13]—a phrase which ups the ante and gives a bardic dimension to Hewitt's 'intuitions, intimations [and] imaginative realizations'—Yeats reveals the disjunction between the artistic and the scholarly disciplines, between those who depend on the sixth sense for the conception and reception of their work, and those who require a *prima facie* case based on research and evidence. This is not to deny that many scholarly and scientific developments and discoveries are also born from the intuitive faculty, but to acknowledge that the criteria by which those developments and discoveries are ultimately judged are, as far as possible, objective criteria.

Artistic work, on the other hand, exhibits that 'situated subjectivity' that Patrick Masterson recently identified as the viewpoint characteristic of the humanities. In his pre-Christmas discourse to this Academy, Professor Masterson cited Thomas Nagel's

conviction that 'the subjectivity of consciousness is an irreducible feature of reality…and it must occupy as fundamental a place in any credible world-view as matter, energy, space time and numbers'; and Masterson went on to concur and conclude in his own words that 'the humanities' viewpoint of situated subjectivity…resists the tendency to consider persons indifferently as just objects or things…whose subjectivity seems to disappear in the light of objective external analysis'.[14]

It was reassuring for me to hear this conviction expressed. It was like a positive second opinion delivered by an expert, the philosopher's seal of approval on something I discovered myself saying more or less spontaneously a few months ago. This was in answer to one of those questions that are infinitely easier to ask than to answer: what, my interviewer wanted to know, had poetry taught me? And I found myself, somewhat to my surprise, coming out with a quick response, which I eventually decided was good enough to stand unrevised. It has taught me, I averred, 'that there's such a thing as truth and that it can be told—slant', (meaning, at an angle, and from different imagined angles); 'that subjectivity is not to be theorised away and is worth defending; that poetry itself has virtue, in the first sense of possessing a quality of moral excellence and in the sense also of possessing inherent strength by reason of its sheer and clear made-upness, its *integritas, consonantia* and *claritas*'.

That was a quick response, yet it underlies everything I've been saying here; what you have been listening to are the subjective observations of somebody who was admitted long ago to the halls of learning simply because he had arrived upon the threshold of the arts. For years I have been privileged to wear the poet's cap and the professor's gown, but now, with the award of the Cunningham Medal, I have received the highest possible endorsement of that dual citizenship of the republic of letters and the commonwealth of the academy—with and without a capital 'A'. So to conclude, I'd like to read a poem I wrote some twenty-four years ago in order to carry me through a similar dual-citizenship moment at Harvard.

In 1984 I was invited to compose that year's *Phi Beta Kappa* poem, which would be delivered in the wooden round of Sanders Theatre. The traditional requirement is that the *Phi Beta Kappa* poem be concerned with the life of learning, so my treatment of the topic began where my life as a poor scholar and my inspiration as poet began, on my home ground in Co. Derry. I followed, in other words, the path I've been following in a different way in these remarks. The poem sees me first as a baby, reading shadows on a candlelit wall; then as a child in the infants classroom, scribbling with chalk on a slate; then as that upwardly mobile scholarship boy;

then as an undergraduate extending his acquaintance with Shakespeare and Robert Graves, experiencing glancing encounters with the Greek alphabet and the legend of a Holy Roman Emperor, even pausing a moment to focus upon a magical talisman devised by a neo-Platonist to help him unite his single mind with the mind of the All. But, eventually, the whole thing ends where it began, with the child's eye gazing in wonder at writing on a wall—except in this case it's the letters of his own family name, letters that had been inscribed high up on the gable of a farm building by a plasterer putting the finishing touches to his job. But in those letters, picked out by trowel point by that local trowel wielder, I imagine and locate my beginnings as a pen-worker, as a pattern-holder and now, most gratefully and most honorifically, as a medal-holder:

Alphabets[15]

I

A shadow his father makes with joined hands
And thumbs and fingers nibbles on the wall
Like a rabbit's head. He understands
He will understand more when he goes to school.

There he draws smoke with chalk the whole first week,
Then draws the forked stick that they call a Y.
This is writing. A swan's neck and swan's back
Make the 2 he can see now as well as say.

Two rafters and a cross-tie on the slate
Are the letter some call *ah*, some call *ay*.
There are charts, there are headlines, there is a right
Way to hold the pen and a wrong way.

First it is 'copying out', and then 'English'
Marked correct with a little leaning hoe.
Smells of inkwells rise in the classroom hush.
A globe in the window tilts like a coloured O.

II

Declensions sang on air like a *hosanna*
As, column after stratified column,
Book One of *Elementa Latina*,
Marbled and minatory, rose up in him.

For he was fostered next in a stricter school
Named for the patron saint of the oak wood
Where classes switched to the pealing of a bell
And he left the Latin forum for the shade

Of new calligraphy that felt like home.
The letters of this alphabet were trees.
The capitals were orchards in full bloom,
The lines of script like briars coiled in ditches.

Here in her snooded garment and bare feet,
All ringleted in assonance and woodnotes,
The poet's dream stole over him like sunlight
And passed into the tenebrous thickets.

He learns this other writing. He is the scribe
Who drove a team of quills on his white field.
Round his cell door the blackbirds dart and dab.
Then self-denial, fasting, the pure cold.

By rules that hardened the farther they reached north
He bends to his desk and begins again.
Christ's sickle has been in the undergrowth.
The script grows bare and Merovingian.

III

The globe has spun. He stands in a wooden O.
He alludes to Shakespeare. He alludes to Graves.
Time has bulldozed the school and school window.
Balers drop bales like printouts where stooked sheaves

Made lambdas on the stubble once at harvest
And the delta face of each potato pit
Was patted straight and moulded against frost.
All gone, with the omega that kept

Watch above each door, the good luck horse-shoe.
Yet shape-note language, absolute on air
As Constantine's sky-lettered IN HOC SIGNO
Can still command him; or the necromancer

Who would hang from the domed ceiling of his house
A figure of the world with colours in it
So that the figure of the universe
And 'not just single things' would meet his sight

When he walked abroad. As from his small window
The astronaut sees all he has sprung from,
The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum —

Or like my own wide pre-reflective stare
All agog at the plasterer on his ladder
Skimming our gable and writing our name there
With his trowel point, letter by strange letter.

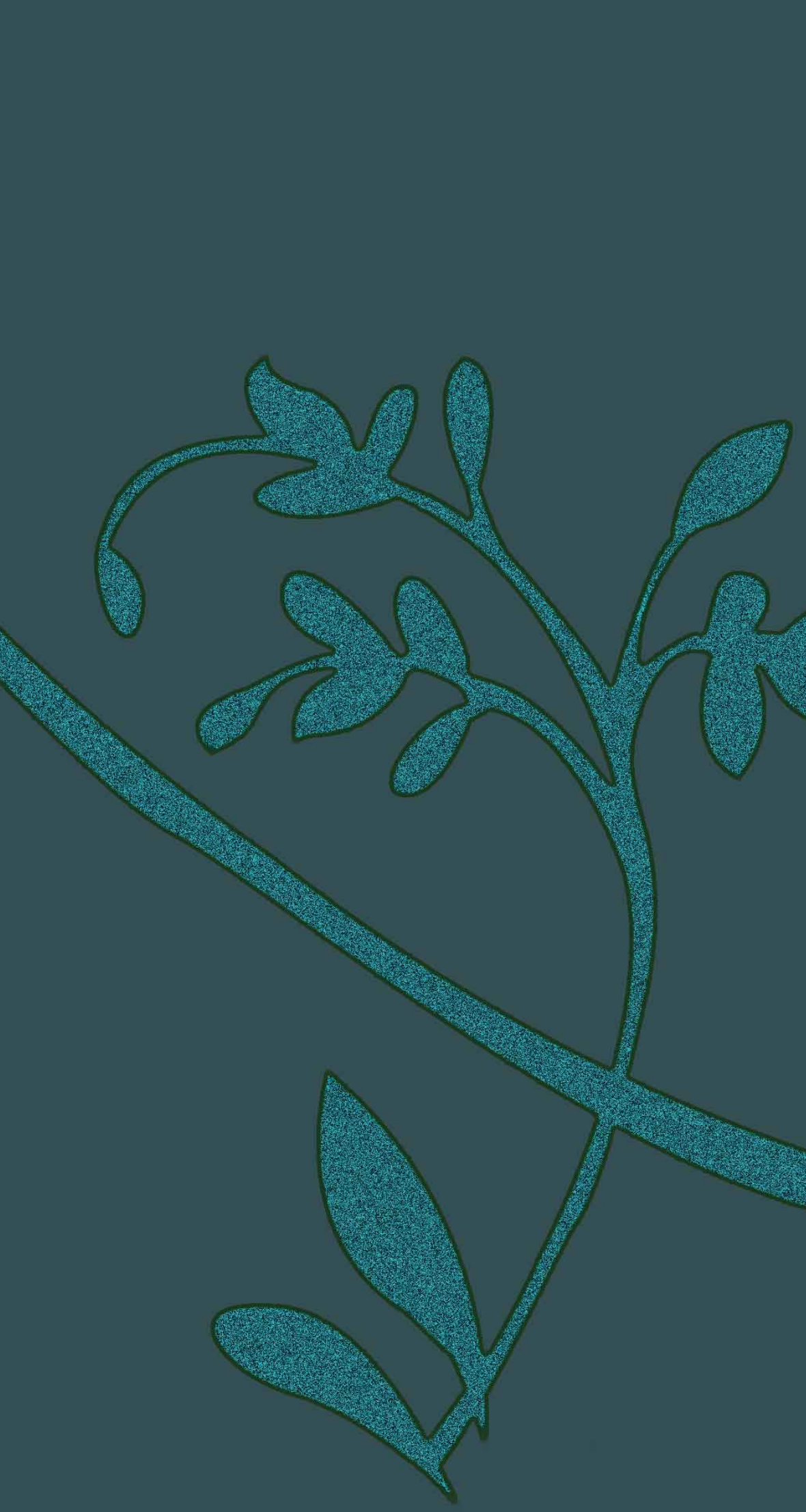
Notes

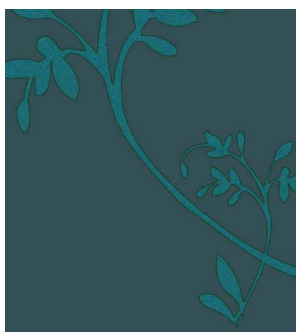
[1] J.M. Synge, *Collected works*, *vol. 4*, 1968, Oxford University Press, 69.
[2] Padraic Colum, 'A poor scholar of the 'forties', *Poems*, 1932, Macmillan, 121.
[3] William Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical ballads*', *The poems*, vol. 1, 1981, Yale University Press, 881.
[4] Seamus Heaney, 'Colmcille the scribe', 1997 (translation of twelfth-century Irish poem *Is scíth mo chrub ó'm scriabín*).
[5] James Joyce, *Finnegans wake*, 1939, Faber and Faber.
[6] Seamus Heaney, 'Digging', *Death of a naturalist*, 1966, Faber and Faber, 13.
[7] Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics: eighth to twelfth century*, 1956, Oxford University Press.
[8] Helen Vendler, 'The ocean, the bird and the scholar', *Jefferson lecture in the humanities*, 6 May 2004, D.C. Convention Center (available at: http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/vendler/lecture.html).
[9] John Hewitt, 'No rootless colonist', *Ancestral voices*, 1987, The Blackstaff Press, 156.
[10] Wallace Stevens, 'A high-toned old christian woman', *The collected poems of Wallace Stevens*, 1954, Alfred A. Knopf, 59.
[11] Robert Frost, 'The figure a poem makes', *Collected poems, prose & plays*, 1995, The Library of America, 777.
[12] Roy Foster, *The apprentice mage, 1865–1914*, (*W.B. Yeats: a life*), vol. 1, 1997, Oxford University Press.
[13] W.B. Yeats, 'Meditations in time of civil war', *The poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard Finneran, 1983, Macmillan, 206.
[14] Patrick Masterson, 'Cultural diversity and human solidarity', Royal Irish Academy discourse, December 2007.
[15] Seamus Heaney, 'Alphabets', *The haw lantern*, 1987, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1–3.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND HUMAN SOLIDARITY

Discourse by
Professor Patrick Masterson, MRIA

Royal Irish Academy
December 2007





It is a great pleasure to have an opportunity to speak with you today on the important but rather elusive topic of 'Cultural Diversity and Human Solidarity'. It is a wide topic and not one that falls directly within my own specialty, which is philosophy of religion. However, it is one that concerns us all and I hope that, in a spirit of seasonal good-will, you will give a hearing to my considered, if non-specialist, reflections on the topic.

The remarks I want to make fall under five headings:

- Some general observations about the problematic character of the relationship between cultural diversity and human solidarity.
- Discussion of a contemporary approach to the topic in terms of the all-embracing claims of science and technology.
- A consideration of the 'charitable' view, that cultures are to be taken as equivalent—or of equal value—because radically incomparable.
- The terms in which I think the issue of the relationship between cultural diversity and human solidarity can be more usefully addressed, namely, in terms of an overlapping consensus of values.
- Finally, the important role that universities can play in promoting this understanding of the relationship.

First, then, some general observations about the issue of cultural diversity and human solidarity.

We like to believe that, despite our obvious cultural diversity, we

share a common humanity, enjoy identical human rights, and uphold standards of behaviour that somehow transcend our cultural differences and enable us to achieve a broad degree of consensus. Trying to give an account of how this is so is a philosophical undertaking. However, it is also a matter of great and urgent practical importance.

I think that the importance and urgency of the topic is painfully illustrated by the *denial* that cultural diversity is compatible with human solidarity, implicit in dreadful events that have occurred over the past few years, for example in New York, Bali, London and Madrid—and are still occurring in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Nor is this a recent phenomenon. It has an ancient pedigree. The claims made on behalf of cultural diversity have often been made at the expense of the idea of human solidarity—the idea that we are all mutually related as beings of equal meaning and value. The ancient Greeks, for example, proud of their remarkable culture, considered everybody else to be barbarians, because their speech was an unintelligible 'ba-ba-ba'. And this same 'democratic' Greek culture rested complacently upon an infrastructure of slaves, who were considered to be less than fully human and unworthy of citizenship. Plato described various people as though composed of different kinds of metal, some more precious than others.

You yourselves can think of many comparable affirmations of cultural excellence and distinctiveness at the expense of human solidarity. Some of these are of religious or pseudo-religious origin; some arise from a colonial outlook; some derive from class or caste distinction; some are of nationalistic, ethnic or supposedly heroic master-race inspiration. Nor is this attitude confined to any particular location or period. It has a notorious history in Europe, in Asia, in Africa. It is not unknown in Ireland. And in the democratic U.S., the native American and the African-American were not always seen as of equal human significance and value to those believed to be more distinctively American.

The issue we are considering is a philosophical one—though, as I have remarked, it is not just of theoretical significance. Philosophy is a reflection on pre-reflective, lived experience with the aim of discovering an intelligible foundation or basis for this experience. But our pre-reflective, lived experience manifests itself in a great diversity of cultural expressions. So, the question arises: 'Given that the way in which we each experience our humanity is profoundly conditioned by our particular culture, can there be, between diverse cultures, an effective dialogue that discloses a common ground of meaning and value, a basic solidarity, notwithstanding the diversity?'

The possibility of inter-cultural dialogue can be considered in

various ways. For example, one can consider the possibility of dialogue between contemporary cultures and previous cultures. Or one can consider the possibility of dialogue between different contemporary cultures (e.g. between Serbian and Albanian culture, between Japanese and Chinese cultures, between European and Muslim cultures or, even more broadly, between Eastern and Western cultures).

Moreover, it is helpful, I think, to reflect that cultural dialogue is not always between *different* peoples. It takes place also within the same person, between their different domains of cultural identity. James Joyce had the hero of his *Portrait of the artist as a young man* describe himself in his early school copybook as: Stephen Dedalus, First Year, Clongowes Wood College, Sallins, Kildare, Ireland, Europe, the World, the Universe.[1] I too am a Dubliner, an Irishman, a European, a citizen of the World, and a speck of dust in the Universe amenable to the laws of physics. The concrete experience that I have of these different Patrick Mastersons, in mutual if inconclusive dialogue, gives me grounds for confidence in the attainability of genuine dialogue between people of very different cultures.

The scope and limits of such inter-cultural accessibility and openness is, of course, the hard question. Here, I merely observe that the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, members of whose family perished in a notorious affirmation of irreducible cultural diversity—the Holocaust, grounds this openness in the acknowledgement of our ethical responsibility vis-à-vis the other person. He says:

> If the moral-political order totally relinquishes its ethical foundation, it must accept all forms of society, including the fascist or totalitarian, for it can no longer evaluate or discriminate between them. The State is usually better than anarchy—but not always. In some instances, fascism or totalitarianism, for example, the political order of the State may have to be challenged in the name of our ethical responsibility to the other.[2]

A comparable consideration arises in the debate about human rights and cultural relativism to which I will advert later.

A culture can be considered as the characteristic profile of the life of an historical community, comprising its systems of representation, of standards, of expression and of action. It is a particular historical expression of a complex hierarchy of spheres of life or values—a distinctive pattern of biological, scientific, technological, aesthetic, political, ethical, philosophical and ideological or religious values. People of different cultures can seek to enter into dialogue and mutual comprehension on these various, relatively autonomous, levels of value. This dialogue is easier on some levels than on others.

For example, one is more likely to reach mutual comprehension and consensus on scientific and technological values than on political, ethical or religious values.

Indeed, and here I come to my second remark, one of the crucial issues in a discussion of culture today is the tendency for science and technology to be regarded universally, not just as a particular domain of value *within* culture, but rather as the only objective and all-embracing form of contemporary culture, *determining or replacing* all other levels of cultural value. Paradoxically, whereas traditionally its culture was what gave a community its sense of roots and ultimate purpose, today we experience the creation of a detached universal culture of *uprootedness* fashioned by the dominant role of science and technology in the promotion of a rather uniform globalisation. And this sense of uprootedness is, I suggest, one of the chief reasons for the vehement reaction against globalisation, with which we are all familiar, and for the contrary assertion of irreducibly diverse cultural particularities at the expense of belief in human solidarity and a shared humanity.

Modern science and technology, although distinct, are intimately related. Broadly speaking, science is primarily a matter of abstracting or transforming information objectively realised in the form of organisation *into* information in the form of conceptual representation, typically numerical or geometrical in character; whereas, conversely, technology is a matter of injecting or transforming information *from* the form of conceptual representation into information in the form of objective organisation.

Nevertheless, science and technology are increasingly interdependent, chiefly in virtue of their common dependence upon operations and instruments. They tend to produce an autonomous evolving reality going beyond physical nature and human consciousness—a reality whose formal structure is shaped by the mathematically modelled concepts of natural science and whose material embodiment is the world-wide network of technological achievement. Today, this technological achievement is most distinctively symbolised by global accomplishments of automation, information technology and biotechnology achieved through a scientifically inspired transformation of nature. However, the original human interventions in physical and biological nature, which fashioned the early development of modern science and technology, have so evolved in scale and complexity that

> the mechanisms which maintain the equilibria favourable to life are no longer able to function properly. It is therefore necessary to devise second-order interventions so as to

> restore certain indispensable equilibria which have been upset or even destroyed by the first-order interventions.[3]

A good illustration is the current discussion on how to cope with global warming!

This increasingly complex, integrated and autonomous system of science and technology is at once the product of humanity and also extrinsic to it. It tends to impose the law of its own astonishing growth upon our lives. It appears to constitute an evolving, cumulative, interconnected blueprint of rationality, defining its objectives autonomously on the basis of its own internal possibilities and absorbing all other considerations within the ambit of its own inherent dynamism. It profoundly affects the economic, political, informational, moral and ideological profile of contemporary social life.

It is obvious that the influence of science and technology profoundly affects our attitude to various spheres of culture, such as entertainment, leisure and the arts. It does so, for example, through the global impact of electronic media on sport, and through the innovative access to form and function in the various arts afforded by new synthetic materials, instruments and tools. This is very obvious in the case of architecture. Moreover, the formalism of much contemporary art echoes the impersonal 'view from nowhere' characteristic of experimental science.

The influence of science and technology on the economic and political life of industrialised societies is equally obvious. Whatever about the claims of 'scientific' socialism, undoubtedly science and technology are the driving force of economic development and political power—which perhaps is why national councils for science and technology are often kept within the remit of the prime minister. And, as we are aware in universities, the organisation of scientific research tends to come under the centralised control of the state in order to serve its purposes. Politicians are increasingly convinced that a directed research policy is crucial to all the economic developments that the electorate demands of them. Science and technology make possible the production of a greater quantity of goods by a lesser quantity of work.[4]

This influence of science and technology also affects our moral outlook. It envisages a new world constructed in accordance with the verifiable possibilities and needs of objective reason. The distinction between fact and value, technical possibility and moral acceptability tends to be eroded. The norms of human action tend to be those suggested by scientific knowledge and the possible technological manipulation of natural and artificial systems. The ends to be achieved are, as it were, dictated by scientific know-how and the available technology. It is as though it is no longer natural human

needs that shape the development of technology, but rather the development of technological systems that shape and manufacture a corresponding framework of artificial human needs. The evolving autonomy of the constructed world of science and technology is often seen as defining the sphere and scope of human autonomy.

This impersonal and operational outlook readily becomes the model for moral evaluations. It dovetails naturally with a utilitarian ethic, which makes its evaluations in terms of objectively calculated outcomes of actions. This tends towards the rational manipulation of industrialised societies by experts along the lines of technocratic managerialism. This can and has resulted in a willingness to perpetrate some dreadful deeds in calm indifference to human rights—such as the large-scale destruction of innocent populations if the overall outcome is deemed by the experts to be of greater utility. Impersonal scientific evaluation of what is the best overall outcome takes precedence over more personal considerations of what one should not do under any circumstances.

However, more fundamentally, our culture is one that increasingly tends to understand itself, evaluate itself, represent itself and organise itself in terms of the indications of science and technology. Other viewpoints of a philosophical, religious or historical tradition are regarded as outdated or delusionary—often seen as embodying a 'God Delusion' in Dawkins's best-selling terminology.[5] The concept of time is secularised to the level of scientific predictability, and the range of reason is progressively identified with scientific rationality. When science is thus taken to be the dominant or only critically justified system of representation, it tends to be viewed as the only possible ground or justification of values—values that used to be underwritten by religion or philosophy.

We must, it is suggested, accept as definitive our condition of global uprootedness and come to terms with the fact that, through science and technology, we are, everywhere and at every level of human existence, in the era of a controlled, artificial reworking of nature—a reworking that extends to the springs of human life itself. Immortality, it can be argued, is a theme more for biotechnology than for religion. As one American geneticist, Craig Venter, remarked recently: 'We are going from reading our genetic code to the ability to write it'.[6] Moreover, this uprootedness is viewed as a development to be welcomed, as a liberation from a culture of destiny to a culture of freedom and choice.

The foregoing line of thought would suggest that a multicultural dialogue of cultures is unnecessary because the world is, or is in the process of becoming, monocultural. We are, the argument goes, in the era of the progressive disintegration of the historical range of

localised and distinctive cultures—and of their progressive reintegration into a uniform global culture. This universal global culture is comprehensively animated by the perspective and possibilities of scientific detachment and technological virtuosity—a virtuosity so triumphantly symbolised at the level of information technology by the World-Wide-Web, which represents an artificial automated transposition of our nervous system. It unfolds naturally under the invisible hand of market-driven forces. This all-embracing monoculture, which determines decisively every level of experience, is one that can defend a rather economic one-dimensional appraisal of human solidarity—extolling the virtues of indifference, equivalence and productivity but at the expense of the multidimensional diversity of historically different cultures.

However, as we are all aware, there is a very vociferous and widespread reaction against this monocultural impulse, which is identified in the popular consciousness with the process of globalisation. Rightly or wrongly, globalisation has been demonised. Even the most ethically motivated expression of globalisation—the claim that human rights have a global authority taking precedence over the sovereignty of national states—is rejected in some quarters as an instrument of Western imperialism. In contrast with, and partly in reaction to, the triumphalist claims of monocultural globalisation, there is a spontaneous resurgence of ethnicity, nationalism, racism, fundamentalism and cultural relativism. It rejects monocultural globalisation as an impersonal combination of self-perpetuating technological imperatives and supra-national financial manipulation. It sees globalisation as contemptuous of the diversity of cultures and of the first-person viewpoint of situated subjects that expresses itself in history, literature, poetry, spontaneity, inter-subjectivity, common roots, beliefs and religion. A somewhat innocent expression of this reaction is found in the anti-scientific attempts of New Age communities to accomplish the re-enchantment of Nature.

This brings me to my third remark, namely, that in its extreme form this reaction against globalisation finds expression in a cultural relativism, which, following the pioneering work of Franz Boas, claims that different cultures should not be judged or evaluated externally, and certainly not evaluated in terms of some monocultural global outlook.

As defined by the anthropologist Herskovits, the 'principle of cultural relativism, briefly stated is as follows: judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation'.[7] In virtue of this principle, cultural relativism is often invoked to advance the claim that cultural diversity is not just a matter of seeing the same inter-human world

differently—rather, it is a matter of seeing different worlds. As one proponent, Edward Sapir, puts it, 'the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached'.[8] Similarly, Ernest Gellner remarks, 'They are what they are, and we are what we are: if we were them, we would have their values, and if they were us they would have ours'.[9] And,with particular reference to religious culture, D.Z. Phillips remarks, 'Religious language is not an interpretation of how things are, but determines how things are for the believer'.[10] In other words, reality is relative to culture.

It seems to me that such viewpoints render multicultural dialogue impossible—and consequently belief in human solidarity on the basis of a common humanity is undermined. If this solidarity and commonality is to be upheld, it is crucial to maintain, in the face of widespread contemporary relativism, that cultural dialogue between different people presupposes that we apprehend the *same* inter-human world, however differently—and *not* that we apprehend *different* worlds. This is important, because if people are wholly insulated from each other by their form of life—or language game, or world-view, or diverse narratives—then any meaningful dialogue to decipher a shared humanity is not, it seems to me, possible.

The idea that cultures are wholly independent forms of life, not open to external critical comprehension or evaluation, is sometimes espoused in the mistaken belief that it is a charitable approach that promotes tolerance vis-à vis different cultures. This idea is advocated as a benign form of moral relativism, a defence against bigotry. We should accept, it is suggested, that only by being a Muslim or a Christian can one truly understand, appreciate or criticise what it means to be a Christian, or a Muslim. Similarly with the distinctive cultural perspective of a Japanese or an American, a gay person or a feminist. Each is contained within his or her own exclusive world-view. Each has its own rationale; and there is no independent trans-world criterion of rationality whereby one might adjudicate between conflicting cultural claims. There is no reason to believe that what different communities see as constituting human meaning, value and purpose is basically similar or can be comparatively evaluated. Therefore, in a spirit of charity, all should be equally tolerated, valued and accepted. As Robert Nozick puts it: 'relativism is egalitarian'.[11]

This cultural relativism is to be found, in a theoretical form, amongst some social anthropologists and reflects an influential philosophical fashion. It finds practical expression in various forms of fundamentalist activism. It implies that 'any' culturally sanctioned moral point of view is right for those who accept and practice it. In the nineteenth century, Newman criticised a version of cultural rela-

tivism called Latitudinarianism, which he describes as the claim

> that no one view is in itself better than another, or at least we cannot tell which is the better. All that we have to do then is to act consistently with what we hold, and to value others if they act consistently with what they hold: that to be consistent constitutes sincerity.[12]

However, in my view, this expresses a greatly mistaken belief and a bogus form of tolerance. For, on the one hand, it can lead to a form of quietism that excuses or 'tolerates' various barbaric and dehumanising practices, such as torture, child abuse or female mutilation or immolation on the grounds that we have no right to condemn such practices when they occur in a culture that we cannot really understand. And, on the other hand, if there can be no rational appraisal and evaluation of different cultures, or rational debate between cultures, then a self-assertive voluntarism is free to usurp the role of reason, and the most powerful community is free to impose, by force, the world view that it espouses as true on others who are taken to be rationally impervious to its claims. Where knowledge fails, the force of will prevails. As Benito Mussolini remarked: 'From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value…modern relativism infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology, and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable'.[13]

The relevance of all of this to current geopolitical issues is painfully obvious. For example, it might seem to some—perhaps to President Bush or to Osama Bin Ladin—that a particular form of liberal democratic culture—or a particular form of theocratic culture—may, and indeed must, be imposed, even by force of arms, on those whose culture, it is presumed, is intrinsically deaf to rational persuasion or conversion.

And so, and this is my fourth observation, we return to the basic question: 'how can we sustain a commitment to human solidarity that respects the claims of cultural diversity? How or where is the balance to be struck between these seemingly incompatible conceptions of human meaning and value? Is there a more satisfactory approach than opting for either a science-and-technology based monoculture, or moral and cultural relativism? This is certainly a difficult and complex issue. In addressing it, I think it important, as I have already mentioned, to hold to the principle or hypothesis that different cultures are perspectives on a shared inter-human world, and that they are not hermetically sealed off from one other.

If one is to avoid such a flight from mutual understanding, it is important to appreciate that each culture embodies a hierarchy of

relatively autonomous spheres of value and that, with varying degrees of difficulty, dialogue across these spheres of value is possible between cultures. For example, as indicated above, one is more likely to reach mutual comprehension and consensus on the level of scientific and technological dialogue than in discussion of political, ethical or religious values. Likewise, the moral norms of human action in a given culture will have a relative autonomy vis-à-vis the metaphysical, ideological or theological view of human nature in which they are embedded. The objective must be to show that, on key moral issues, what John Rawls calls an 'overlapping consensus'[14] obtains between cultures and that, therefore, an irreducible 'clash of civilisations'[15] is not inevitable. The challenge is to show that, within different cultures, similar moral norms may be operative—even though their justification and concrete application may vary from one culture to another.

As Charles Taylor observes, this would involve that

> different groups, countries, religious communities and civilisations, although holding incompatible fundamental values on theology, metaphysics, human nature, and so on, would come to an agreement on certain norms that ought to govern human behaviour. Each would have its own way of justifying this from out of its own profound background conception. We would agree on the norms while disagreeing on why they were the right norms, and we would be content to live in this consensus.[16]

To what extent and how this overlapping consensus can be achieved is problematic. However, something like it must be accomplished if, for example, the universal Declaration of Human Rights and internationally proclaimed norms of human conduct are to be convincingly upheld as interculturally valid, rather than seen as embedded exclusively in a distinctively Western account of the meaning and value of human existence. For if they are so seen, as indeed they sometimes are by non-Western cultures, they will be understandably challenged as the imposed cultural carry-over of a colonial legacy that does not speak to Asian values such as Buddhism or Confucianism, or to Muslim or African values. Thus, the Iranian representative to the United Nations claimed in 1981 that its Declaration of Human Rights was a secular understanding of the Judaeo–Christian tradition, which could not be implemented by Muslims without trespassing upon Islamic law.

We must learn to live with the realisation that moral norms which we cherish as universal, such as the right to life, immunity from torture, and freedom of speech, find differing articulations and justi-

fications in different cultures. And it is not only in non-Western regimes that we must seek to discern where a moral norm may be operative in a debatable interpretation. The recent circumlocutions by the American administration about what constitutes torture is a reminder that problematic ambiguity in the interpretation of officially agreed moral norms is also to be found nearer home.

This realisation requires an ongoing interrogation of our own culturally embedded moral values, their basis and application, and an openness to the possibility, indeed the necessity, of learning from the insights of other, perhaps initially alien, cultures. These cultures may effectively cherish and implement the same values that we cherish, but in a manner and in terms of a framework of belief very different to our own. For example, the Buddhist injunction to seek one's enlightenment by renouncing violence can generate a *consequential* commitment to a broad programme of human rights. Likewise in Confucianism, freedom of speech is valued not indeed as an individual human right, but as a value contributing to the social good.[17]

More generally, the perception of the 'Western' claim to human rights as an innate, underived subjective entitlement of the individual, anterior to any societal requirement, contrasts with the perception of the Muslim view that they are God-given, or the 'Asian' view that human rights are not innate attributes of individuals but products of a social context acquired by living up to a prescribed code of collective human conduct. This can lead, on the one hand, to a view of Western culture as irresponsibly individualistic—best represented by New York's Central Park at night, with guns, drugs, violence and vagrancy manifesting the breakdown of civil society. Conversely, Asian culture can be portrayed as authoritarian, discriminatory and illiberal, claiming that individuals exist for the state rather than vice versa.[18]

This contrast can lead to mutual misunderstanding, denigration and rejection of each other as corrupt or oppressive. Instead, what is needed is mutual investigation of the extent to which there might, in practice, be an overlapping consensus of moral norms; notwithstanding the very different local and cultural contexts of their justification or expression. And this should lead to common exploration of how these norms might be better understood and promoted by learning from each other. This is easier said than done, but it needs to be said and it should be done.

So far in this discussion of the relationship between cultural diversity and human solidarity, I have indicated that the sort of impersonal solidarity envisaged by the monocultural perspective of science and technology provokes an anti-globalisation backlash, which emphasises radical cultural diversity. This, in an extreme form,

so insulates cultures from each other that it undermines the very ideal of human solidarity. I have suggested that in order to defend an ideal of human solidarity—particularly with regard to universal human rights such as the right to life, to immunity from torture, to freedom of expression—one needs to develop the theory of overlapping consensus, which envisages the possibility of discerning comparable moral norms across cultures even though differently expressed and differently justified.

In the fifth and final part of my talk, I would like to emphasise the important role of universities in this task. I became keenly aware of this from my professional experience, first as a professor and then as a university president in Dublin and Florence. My most recent experience was as president of the European University Institute in Florence, where about 700 scholars from a great variety of national and cultural backgrounds worked effectively for their doctorate degrees or on post-doctorate research programmes and generated together a shared, added value of intercultural respect, tolerance, understanding and accord. Here, I was particularly impressed at the way in which the newly arrived doctorate student developed: from an initial conviction that the way in which issues were addressed in his or her own home university was best, to the realisation that the challenge of other viewpoints and approaches is not a threat but a great opportunity to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of an issue. An interesting example of this is the way in which such students, when discussing the issues relating to new applicant states to the EU, didn't simply view these issues from the viewpoint of their impact upon existing members but also from the viewpoint of the applicant countries themselves.

It seems to me that universities, which are becoming increasingly international and multicultural institutions, are ideally situated to promote, through their multidisciplinary resources and international relationships, the possibility and range of overlapping cultural consensus. In a more general but equally important and relevant way, they are able to bring into creative dialogue the differing but complementary ways of knowing that are provided, on the one hand, by natural science and technology, and on the other hand, by the humanities and human sciences.

This is important, because it provides a necessary counterpart to the tendency to envisage a uniform global contemporary culture of which science and technology provide the only credible interpretation. This tendency has, I have suggested, a profoundly dismissive and disintegrating effect on the diversity of traditional cultures and contributes to the backlash of anti-globalisation. The humanities and social sciences make available a complementary

perspective on the nature of reality in general and of human existence in particular to that suggested by absolutising the outlook of natural science and technology as the only credible interpretant of contemporary culture.

There is no question here of mistrust or rejection of the capacity of science and technology or of the astonishing achievements provided by the clarity, precision and measured control of their discourse and operational procedures. Any such mistrust or repudiation would be absurd. It is rather a matter of recognising the legitimacy, indeed the necessity, of another complementary perspective and mode of enquiry.

Two such differences may be noted. First, there is the literary, imaginative and hermeneutical mode of expression of the humanities by comparison with the mathematically modelled and interventionally tested theories typical of natural science and technology—a comparison, one might say, of knowledge understood as speculative interpretation with knowledge understood as active operation. Second, despite the sometimes illuminating efforts to conform the humanities and social sciences to the model of the natural sciences, they retain a characteristic openness to what may be called the humanistic perspective of existential subjectivity. Let us consider briefly each of these two differences.

The great themes of human meaning and value—such as those relating to the nature of truth, goodness, justice, human rights, cultural identity, our personal significance and grounds for hope—have a history formulated chiefly in imaginative representation and poetic and literary expression. This history can be critically re-appropriated and creatively opened to the future by means of hermeneutical, dialectical and imaginative skills of interpretation, of illuminating metaphor, of adequate definition, of felicitous analogy, of perceptive irony and sensitive appreciation of the relevant language game. As the novelist Iris Murdoch observed:

> the final and best discoveries are often made in the actual formulation of the statement. The careful, responsible, skilful use of words is our highest instrument of thought and one of our highest modes of being: an idea which might seem obvious but is not by any means universally accepted.[19]

The mathematical and operational discourse appropriate to science and technology, the clarity, precision and measured control of its hypotheses and prescriptions for active intervention in the course of events, undeniably achieves enabling access to energy, power and the technical manipulation of natural and informational systems. It

prescribes a systematic intervention in the course of events, which 'consists in producing a determined, detectable and analysable effect in circumstances which have been prepared according to a precise plan and in terms of hypotheses relative to the possible effects'.[20]

However, in an age of nuclear energy and cultural confrontation, it can be argued that our most pressing problem is not so much one of generating and harnessing energy, but rather one of cultivating a form of discourse in which people with access to enough energy to destroy all civilisation can speak responsively to one another. The humanities and the social sciences promote, or at least *can* promote, this linguistic sensitivity to persons as culturally diverse subjects in an age of global and increasingly uniform technological expertise. I think of the way in which bloggers have sought to personalise the anonymity of the great technological information system—the Internet.

This introduces the second observation, namely, that the humanities and social sciences are open to considering topics from the particular point of view of existential subjectivity, by contrast with the natural scientist's typical interest in impersonal, objective considerations. This distinction between particular personal and objective impersonal viewpoints represents two irreducible poles of a spectrum. As the philosopher Thomas Nagel observes:

> A great deal is essentially connected to a particular point of view, or type of point of view, and the attempt to give a complete account of the world in objective terms detached from these perspectives inevitably leads to false reductions or to outright denial that certain patently real phenomena exist at all….For many philosophers the exemplary case of reality is the world described by physics, the science in which we have achieved our greatest detachment from a specifically human perspective on the world. But for precisely that reason physics is bound to leave undescribed the irreducibly subjective character of conscious mental processes, whatever may be their intimate relation to the physical operation of the brain. The subjectivity of consciousness is an irreducible feature of reality—without which we couldn't do physics or anything else—and it must occupy as fundamental a place in any credible world-view as matter, energy, space time and numbers.[21]

This conviction is expressed even more emphatically by Merleau-Ponty when he writes:

> I am not the outcome or intersection of multiple causalities which determine my body or my 'psyche'. I cannot

> think of myself as a bit of the world…nor enclose myself within the universe of science. All that I know of the world, even by science, I know from a viewpoint which is mine, or from an experience of the world without which the symbols of science would have nothing to say…scientific views according to which I am a moment of the world are always naïve and hypocritical, because they imply, without mentioning it, this other view, that of consciousness, by virtue of which in the first place a world disposes itself about me and begins to exist for me. To return to things themselves is to return to that world prior to objective knowledge of which knowledge always speaks, and in respect of which every scientific determination is abstract, indicative and dependent, as geography is in respect of a landscape where we have grasped from the outset that which is a forest, a meadow or a river.[22]

Whereas the impersonal objective viewpoint, 'the view from nowhere', is characteristic of natural science, it should be emphasised that the humanities' viewpoint of situated subjectivity is not a matter of mere private or arbitrary opinion. In general, its proposals are advanced as inter-subjectively, and even inter-culturally, verifiable. However, it resists the tendency to consider persons indifferently as just objects or things in the world whose subjectivity seems to disappear in the light of objective external analysis.

The humanities and social sciences retain an appreciation of the importance of this viewpoint of subjectivity. They take seriously the view that we are not just interchangeable instances of anonymous processes but, astonishingly, irreducible, intentional agents involved in complex interpersonal, social and intercultural relationships with other unique personal agents. Taking this viewpoint seriously has far-reaching implications across the spectrum of economic, political, legal and moral life. It promotes respect for the integrity, dignity and rights of the individual person.

This has been an evolving, though often challenged, theme of European culture: from its Judaeo-Christian, Graeco-Roman origins; through its reaffirmation in the medieval debates with Arabian scholars about individual human intellect and will; its triumph in the Florentine Renaissance; and its importance today in discussions of human rights and the proper balance between the claims of free-market competition and communal solidarity—which can be viewed as a quest for the proper balance between the viewpoint of impersonal objectivity and the viewpoint of irreducible subjectivity.

The discourse and perspective of the humanities and social

sciences provide for a more articulated and multidimensional conception of culture than that which suggests that all aspects of culture, globally, should be understood and evaluated exclusively from the perspective of natural science and technology. Moreover, it also provide a perspective from which cultural diversity can be respected and overlapping cultural consensus explored, through comparative interdisciplinary research utilising various intellectual resources, including literature, history, anthropology, political science, philosophy and even theology.

In this way, a more developed conception of human solidarity can be portrayed than that available through the exclusive claim of a science-and-technology based monoculture, or the isolationism of a philosophically inspired cultural relativism. It is a conception that emphasises that a culture aims to provide its participants with a framework of roots, ethical norms and ultimate aims; and it is capable of exploring the overlapping analogies and comparabilities in these various dimensions of existence across cultures. Such reflection can promote greater tolerance and understanding and appreciation that all cultures, including our own, are varying approximations to an as yet only dimly envisaged common ideal of truth and justice, which Charles Sanders Peirce called 'the general intended interpretant'.[23] This yet to be achieved ideal of human fulfilment is adumbrated differently in various cultures, but common ground can be discerned about what favours it and what does not.

To promote such understanding and appreciation is a particular competence of universities. To do so effectively they must cherish the different avenues to truth represented, on the one hand, by the humanities and social sciences and, on the other hand, by natural science and technology. To denigrate one in the name of the other is to promote a false conception of the unity of knowledge, which cannot be a unity of uniformity but only of composition, analogy and asymmetrical interaction. It is this difference and interaction that can shed light upon the issue of cultural diversity and human solidarity and its associated dramas of globalisation and anti-globalisation, and the contemporary impact of science and technology on traditional culture.

The university has a special responsibility to show, through the co-operation of its diverse intellectual resources, that these issues need not be left in irreducible opposition: that a higher mediating reconciliation can be envisaged between cultural diversity and human solidarity, between globalisation and anti-globalisation and between the impersonal autonomy of science and technology and the personal autonomy of human subjects. This is truly a mission that the university is better placed and equipped to address than any

other institution.

Notes

[1] James Joyce, *A portrait of the artist as a young man*, 1917, The Egoist Ltd.
[2] Emmanuel Levinas, in R. Kearney, *Dialogues with contemporary continental thinkers: the phenomenological heritage, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton*, 1986, Manchester University Press, 66.
[3] J. Ladriere, *The challenge presented to cultures by science and technology,* 1977, UNESCO, 97. (The discussion in this section is greatly indebted to this work.)
[4] Ladriere, *Challenge presented to cultures*, 64.
[5] Richard Dawkins, *The God delusion*, 2006, Bantam Books.
[6] Craig Venter, 'Verbatim', *Time,* 11 October 2007.
[7] M. Herskovits, *Man and his works*, 1960, Knopf, 61.
[8] Edward Sapir, quoted in M. Baghramian, *Relativism*, 2004, Routledge, 66. (The discussion in this section is indebted to this excellent work.)
[9] E. Gellner, *Conditions of liberty: civil society and its rivals*, 1994, Allen Lane, 213–14.
[10] D.Z. Phillips, *Faith and philosophical enquiry*, 1971, Schocken Books, 132.
[11] Robert Nozick, *Invariances: the structure of the objective world*, 2001, Harvard University Press, 19.
[12] J.H. Newman, *Discourses and Arguments on various subjects*, 2004, Birmingham Oratory millennium edition, University of Notre Dame Press, 129.
[13] Benito Mussolini, quoted in Baghramian, *Relativism*, 117.
[14] John Rawls coined the term 'overlapping consensus' in *Political liberalism*, 1993, Columbia University Press.
[15] Political theorist Samuel P. Huntington proposed the theory of a 'clash of civilizations', first in 'The clash of civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3) (Summer 1993), and later in *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, 1996, Simon and Schuster.
[16] Charles Taylor, 'Conditions of an unforced consensus on human rights', in J.R. Bauer and D.A. Bell (eds), *The East Asian challenge for human rights*, 1999, Cambridge University Press, 124–46: 124.
[17] *Cf.* Joseph Chan, 'A confucian perspective on human rights for contemporary China', in Bauer and Bell, *The East Asian challenge for human rights,* 212–40: 229.
[18] *Cf.* Jack Donnelly, 'Human rights and Asian values: a defence of "Western" universalism', in Bauer and Bell, *The East Asian challenge for human rights*, 60–87.
[19] Iris Murdoch, *The fire and the sun: why Plato banished the artists*, 1977, Oxford University Press, 87.
[20] Ladriere, *Challenge presented to cultures*, 27.
[21] Thomas Nagel, *The view from nowhere*, 1986, Oxford University Press, 7–8.
[22] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945, Librairie Gallimard, ii–iii.
[23] Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Lectures on pragmatism', *The collected papers, vol. 5: Pragmatism and pragmaticism*, 1998, Thoemmes Press.

Five hundred numbered copies of

ARTICULATIONS:
poetry, philosophy and the shaping of culture

are published by the Royal Irish Academy.
450 are signed by the President of the Royal Irish Academy
and 50 are signed by Seamus Heaney and Patrick Masterson

Four hundred and fifty copies are for sale.

March 2008

This is number