Building on the arguments of the excerpt below, discuss the relationship between utilitarian thinking, competitiveness and the humanities.

Excerpt from: Marilynne Robinson, What Are We Doing Here?

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Our great universities, with their vast resources, their exhaustive libraries, look like a humanist’s dream. Certainly, with the collecting and archiving that has taken place in them over centuries, they could tell us much that we need to know. But there is pressure on them now to change fundamentally, to equip our young to be what the Fabians used to call “brain workers.” They are to be skilled laborers in the new economy, intellectually nimble enough to meet its needs, which we know will change constantly and unpredictably. I may simply have described the robots that will be better suited to this kind of existence, and with whom our optimized workers will no doubt be forced to compete, poor complex and distractible creatures that they will be still.

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You may have noticed that the United States is always in an existential struggle with an imagined competitor. It may have been the cold war that instilled this habit in us. It may have been nineteenth-century nationalism, when America was coming of age and competition among the great powers of Europe drove world events. Whatever etiology is proposed for it, whatever excuse is made for it, however rhetorically useful it may be in certain contexts, the habit is deeply harmful, as it has been in Europe as well, when the competition involved the claiming and defending of colonies, as well as militarization that led to appalling wars. Who died in all those wars? The numbers lost assure us that there were artists and poets and mathematicians among them, and statesmen, though at best their circumstances may never have allowed them or us to realize their gifts.

What was lost to those colonizations? The many regions that bore the brunt of them struggle to discover a social order they can accept as legitimate and authoritative, with major consequences for the old colonizers and the whole world. Who loses in these economic competitions? Those who win, first of all, because the foot soldiers of those economies work too much for meagre, even uncertain pay and are exposed to every insult this cheapening of fundamental value visits on the earth and the air. How many artists and scientists ought there to be among those vast legions? And among their threatened children? There is a genius for impoverishment always at work in the world. And it has its way, as if its proceedings were not only necessary, but even sensible. Its rationale, its battle cry, is Competition.

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A great irony is at work in our historical moment. We are being encouraged to abandon our most distinctive heritage—in the name of self-preservation. The logic seems to go like this: To be as strong as we need to be we must have a highly efficient economy. Society must be disciplined, stripped down, to achieve this efficiency and to make us all better foot soldiers. The alternative is decadence, the eclipse of our civilization by one with more fire in its belly. We are to be prepared to think very badly of our antagonist, whichever one seems to loom at a given moment. It is a convention of modern literature, and of the going-on of talking heads
and public intellectuals, to project what are said to be emerging trends into a future in which cultural, intellectual, moral, and economic decline will have hit bottom, more or less.

Somehow this kind of talk always seems brave and deep. The specifics concerning this abysmal future are vague—Britain will cease to be Britain, America will cease to be America, France will cease to be France, and so on, depending on which country happens to be the focus of Spenglerian gloom. Of course these three societies have changed profoundly in the last hundred years, the last fifty years, and few with any knowledge of history would admit to regretting the change. What is being invoked is the notion of a precious and unnamable essence, second nature to some, in the marrow of their bones, in effect. By this view others, cannot understand or value it, and therefore they are a threat.

The definitions of “some” and “others” are unclear and shifting. In America, since we are an immigrant country, our “nativists” may be first- or second-generation Americans whose parents or grandparents were themselves considered suspect on these same grounds. It is almost as interesting as it is disheartening to learn that nativist rhetoric can have impact in a country where precious few can claim to be native in any ordinary sense. Our great experiment has yielded some valuable results—here a striking demonstration of the emptiness of such rhetoric, which is nevertheless loudly persistent in certain quarters in America, and which obviously continues to be influential in Britain and Europe.

Nativism is always aligned with an impulse or strategy to shape the culture with which it claims to have this privileged intimacy. It is urgently intent on identifying enemies and confronting them, and it is hostile to the point of loathing toward aspects of the society that are taken to show their influence. In other words, these lovers of country, these patriots, are wildly unhappy with the country they claim to love, and are bent on remaking it to suit their own preferences, which they feel no need to justify or even fully articulate. Neither do they feel any need to answer the objections of those who see their shaping and their disciplining as mutilation.

What is at stake now, in this rather inchoate cluster of anxieties that animates so many of us, is the body of learning and thought we call the humanities. Their transformative emergence has historically specifiable origins in the English and European Renaissance. At the time and for centuries afterward it amounted to very much more than the spread of knowledge, because it was understood as a powerful testimony to human capacities, human grandeur, the divine in the human. And it had the effect of awakening human capacities that would not otherwise have been imagined.

Alexis de Tocqueville, an early and enduring interpreter of American civilization, published his great Democracy in America, in two volumes, in 1835 and 1840. He was interested in the new society for its implications for civilization in Europe, especially France. His treatment of it is equable and perceptive, though he does have his doubts. Speaking in his introduction of the effects of the spread of learning in the countries of the West, he says:

From the moment when the exercise of intelligence had become a source of strength and wealth, each step in the development of science, each new area of knowledge, each fresh idea had to be viewed as a seed of power placed within people’s grasp. Poetry, eloquence, memory, the beauty of wit, the fires of imagination, the depth of thought, all these gifts which heaven shares out by chance turned to the advantage of democracy and, even when they belonged to the enemies of democracy, they still
promoted its cause by highlighting the natural grandeur of man. Its victories spread, therefore, alongside those of civilization and education. Literature was an arsenal open to all, where the weak and the poor could always find arms.

This passage provides a sense of what became newly available to respect and admiration as knowledge spread through the populace—poetry, eloquence, wit, imagination, depth of thought—where they would not have been seen or acknowledged in earlier generations. Any excellence, while it is given by heaven, more or less at random from the world’s perspective, is testimony to the fact that human beings are endowed with a capacity for excellence, whatever form it takes in any individual case. Their natural grandeur, which is overturning the old order, is not a matter of political or economic power. The splendor of the gifts themselves, as they are liberated by new areas of knowledge, by fresh ideas, makes the case for democracy.

It is to be noted that these gifts are highly individual. There is no talk here of the folk, or the masses, though the transformation of society Tocqueville describes has potential for a radical, progressive overturning. There is no suggestion that those who are rising can or should be shaped or led toward participation in a benign new order foreseen either by them or for them. The social order is forming itself around change brought about by these individual expressions of a collective grandeur. Tocqueville sees something like inspiration sweeping through the West as knowledge spreads and science advances. Crucially, there is no mention of competition, no implication of a hierarchy of abilities or gifts. Every excellence, every achievement, enhances the general wealth of possibility for yet more excellence.

And it is interesting to note that for Tocqueville there is no simple notion of utility. This awakening of minds and spirits is a sunlight that falls across the whole landscape of civilization. The questions being put to us now—What good are the humanities? Why are they at the center of our education?—might, for all history can tell us, be answered decisively by this vision of the effects of learning, which took hold and flourished as the study of ancient poetry, philosophy and language, Scripture and theology, and of history itself, by means of the printing press and the rise of vernacular languages, long before science and technology even began to come abreast of them.

However, in the history of the West, for all its achievements, there is also a persisting impatience with the energy and originality of the mind. It can make us very poor servants of purposes that are not our own. A Benthamite panopticon would have radically reduced the varieties of experience that help to individuate us, in theory producing happiness in factory workers by preventing their having even a glimpse of the fact that there could be more to life. Censorship, lists of prohibited books, restrictions on travel, and limits on rights of assembly all accomplish by more practicable means some part of the same exclusions, precluding the stimulus of new thought, new things to wonder about. The contemporary assault on the humanities has something of the same objective and would employ similar methods. Workers, a category that seems to subsume us all except the idlest rich, should learn what they need to learn to be competitive in the new economy. All the rest is waste and distraction.

Competitive with whom? On what terms? To what end? With anyone whose vigor and good fortune allows her to prosper, apparently. With anyone who has done a clever thing we did not think of first. And will these competitors of ours be left to enjoy the miserable advantage of low wages and compromised health? And is there any particular reason to debase human life in order to produce more, faster, without reference to the worth of the product, or to the
value of the things sacrificed to its manufacture? Wouldn’t most people, given an hour or two to reflect, consider this an intolerably trivial use to be put to, for them and their children? Life is brief and fragile, after all. Then what is this new economy whose demands we must always be ready to fill? We may assume it will be driven by innovation, and by what are called market forces, which can be fads or speculation or chicanery.

The ideal worker will not have a head full of poetry, say the neo-Benthamites. It is assumed, of course, that he or she will be potentially omnicompetent in service to the ever-changing needs and demands of the new economy—highly trained, that is, to acquire some undescribed skill set that will be proof against obsolescence. We await particulars. But the object is clear—to create a virtual army out of the general population who will compete successfully against whomever for whatever into an endless future, at profound cost to themselves.

What are we doing here, we professors of English? Our project is often dismissed as elitist. That word has a new and novel sting in American politics. This is odd, in a period uncharacteristically dominated by political dynasties. Apparently the slur doesn’t stick to those who show no sign of education or sophistication, no matter what their pedigree. Be that as it may. There is a fundamental slovenliness in much public discourse that can graft heterogeneous things together around a single word. There is justified alarm about the bizarre concentrations of wealth that have occurred globally, and the tiny fraction of the wealthiest one percent who have wildly disproportionate influence over the lives of the rest of us. They are called the elite, and so are those of us who encourage the kind of thinking that probably does make certain of the young less than ideal recruits to their armies of the employed.

If there is a point where the two meanings overlap, it would be in the fact that the teaching we do is what in America we have always called liberal education, education appropriate to free people. Now, in a country richer than any could have imagined, we are endlessly told we must cede that humane freedom to a very uncertain promise of employability.

If I seem to have conceded an important point in saying that the humanities do not prepare ideal helots, economically speaking, I do not at all mean to imply that they are less than ideal for preparing capable citizens, imaginative and innovative contributors to a full and generous, and largely unmonetizable, national life.

Then how to recover the animating spirit of humanism? For one thing, it would help if we reclaimed, or simply borrowed, conceptual language that would allow us to acknowledge that some things are so brilliant they can only be understood as virtuosic acts of mind, thought in the pure enjoyment of itself, whether in making a poem or a scientific discovery, or just learning something it feels unaccountably good to know. There is an unworldliness in the experience, and in what it yields, that requires a larger understanding than our terse vocabularies of behavior and reward can capture. I have had students tell me that they had never heard the word “beautiful” applied to a piece of prose until they came to us at the workshop. Literature had been made a kind of data to illustrate, supposedly, some graceless theory that stood apart from it, and that would be shed in a year or two and replaced by something post- or neo- and in any case as gracelessly irrelevant to a work of language as whatever it displaced. I think this phenomenon is an effect of the utilitarian hostility to the humanities and to art, an attempt to repackage them, to give them some appearance of respectability. And yet, the beautiful persists, and so do eloquence and depth of thought, and they belong to all of us because they are the most pregnant evidence we can have of what is possible in us.