CONCLUSION

Liberals are, almost by definition, centrists, avoiding the perils of both revolution and reaction. That the word 'ambivalence' has appeared so often in this thesis is symptomatic; one of the things I have been trying to do is recover a degree of respectability for a term which now appears to be synonymous with indecisiveness and timidity, rather than, as it should be, with the careful weighing of alternatives.

Liberals are also, historically, the heirs and beneficiaries of the European Enlightenment. Perhaps it is the very unambiguousness of the connection that makes Third World intellectuals, for instance, hostile to liberal thought in general: for the colonized, the European Enlightenment is just as likely to be seen as the source of Eurocentric arrogance as it is of emancipatory discourses, suitable for all human beings everywhere. What I would have liked to do is help in the process of disentangling Enlightenment thought from its local moorings in Western Europe, thereby increasing its accessibility; but that could not be attempted in this thesis. Neither have I attempted to defend the particular form of rationality that is arguably the chief legacy of the Enlightenment: on the contrary, I have concentrated on the humanistic opposition to the dominance of this form of rationality. This opposition, (which I wholeheartedly endorse) is, however, still an opposition mounted from within the Enlightenment; and for it to be effective, it is
vitaly important that it distinguish itself from the discourses that are unequivocally hostile to the legacy of the Enlightenment. These counter-Enlightenment discourses, combining positivist and idealist tendencies, ought, I feel, to be resisted: they are dangerous not only because they celebrate anarchy and are retrogressive in themselves, but because they are difficult to locate on the philosophical and political spectrum. This thesis attempts, among other things, to locate these discourses so that they are more easily identifiable. The resources of Enlightenment thought are considerable, and considerably varied: they include criticism of the Enlightenment, and range from the insights and achievements of liberal thinkers and politicians to the radicalised Enlightenment of the Marxists. Feminism in its central impulses owes more to Enlightenment critique of privilege and hierarchy than to the anarchic counter-Enlightenment thought that has become so influential in recent times, especially in academic circles. A clearer sense of the range and power of these resources is bound to help us towards the achievement of a `good' modernity, a modernity based on justice, tolerance, mutual respect and ecological sensitivity rather than one based on consumerism, technological growth, or material exploitation.

I have been arguing that the university is an important location for what I have been calling the negotiation of modernity, and that secularism marks the beginning of our modernity. But negotiation presupposes understanding, and for
understanding one has to draw back, one has to contemplate from a distance. If the university is to carry out its obligations properly, a certain detachment from everyday life is required; for it is everyday life that bears most unequivocally the imprint of modernity, and one cannot see an object one is too close to. One does not have to believe in social hierarchies and elites, however, to argue that it will benefit all of us if some of us choose to try and imaginatively reconstruct the past, or try to relate to each other what most people would consider arid abstractions, or struggle to read books written many centuries earlier, in a language we have not always been familiar with, or contemplate a work of art in such a way that the act of contemplation may be taught to others. And I believe we will do these things more effectively if we do them in a spirit of amateurism, without much concern for profit or advancement, with a degree of playfulness, and if we are concerned with how we may give shape to our minds and personalities in the process.

There is the danger, of course, that the idea of the necessary detachment of the scholar will be used to justify quietism, or worse still, gross injustice. Writers like Edward Said are justifiably concerned about the fact that the university has become increasingly detached from the reality of the world outside its boundaries. It seems to me that both tendencies, towards ivory tower isolation and towards complete involvement in political reform (or revolution), are spreading, and may actually be stimulating each other. So we have a bizarre situation in
which people for whom all aspects of reality are in some sense political are expending their considerable energies on the discrediting of the moral and political motivations of, say, an author who wrote novels in the nineteenth century; and on the other hand there are those who, believing that all political involvement or moral protest will hurt their careers, or earn them unpopularity, achieve a serenity and detachedness that would be admirable in a different setting.

When I began this thesis four years ago I intended to be much more critical of the amateurism and elitism in the university, and especially in English studies. Feminist critiques of patriarchy, in particular, I believed should be taken seriously, and I still think so. But as I grew better acquainted with the strident denunciations of the university, I grew more convinced of their intellectual inadequacy to the task they confronted. Demolition-work was undertaken cheerfully, while any kind of reconstructive effort was derided as contributing to the loathed status quo. Widespread obscurity, and what is worse, obscurantism, seem to have become the normative feature of critical prose in English studies. The coming together of those who have been most determined to professionalise their disciplines and those who have been most hostile to the rationality of the Western intellectual tradition was revealing as well as disconcerting.

It has been difficult for me not to feel anachronistically romantic in the face of the changes that have taken place in the
university in the last few decades. Many of the books I had to read while preparing for this thesis seemed to have been written in a spirit of vindictive joy that the university was crumbling.¹ Reading these books, I was uncomfortably aware that this brave new world of what Peter Sloterdijk calls "enlightened false consciousness" was not for me.² I felt like a character from a Henry James novel admiring a beautiful old house, imagining the graciousness of the lives of the inhabitants, but knowing it was not likely to stand for much longer, and knowing also that he or she was not likely to be invited in.

In MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, our condition is likened to that of a society in the aftermath of some great disaster, in which, among other things, documents of all sorts are destroyed, and the society has to reconstruct its prior history and moral commitments with the fragments that are available. We, similarly, seem to have forgotten the foundational justifications for university education, and cannot easily deal with criticism of the enterprise. Our forgetfulness is doubtless linked to our devotion to specialization and our suspicion of general ideas, of philosophy (philosophy, that is, in the earlier, non-departmental, sense; philosophy as it is studied within university departments may be actually worse off than the other disciplines). Scholars from English studies, for instance, tend not to make large general statements about justifications for university education because they think someone from philosophy (or philosophy of education) will despise them for their
ineptness. It is partly the willingness of the younger scholars
to grapple with Continental philosophy and return to `grand
theory' that accounts for the general shift, among students, away
from traditional concerns. Trilling was one of the few critics in
English studies who consistently saturated criticism with thought
(to paraphrase Arnold on Burke). The tradition Trilling was
opposing, the one which believed that really fine minds could not
be violated by a thought, has been the dominant one in English
studies, and its dominance has undone it. Walter Pater, very far
from being any kind of systematic philosopher, quoting Novalis,
tells us that philosophy draws us out of apathy, it revivifies,
it startles the human spirit into a sharp and eager observation.3
Surely the humanities, and the university, is in need of such
revivifying philosophy.
NOTES

1. Unfortunately, the other sort of book I had to read, the sort which set out to defend the traditional learning against the onslaughts of the radical barbarians: these also proved disappointing. Partly it was a matter of tone. Many of the authors could not help sounding like apoplectic retired military men, or the parodic versions of them one encounters in comic novels. They blustered, and that was fatal to their argument; also, they sounded wounded and betrayed, which was an admission of defeat. But it was also a matter of content. A confident defence of traditional education, not guilty, not bad-tempered, not defiantly callous towards women, minorities and egalitarian movements, respectful towards the opposition but unyielding on matters of principle: this was rare.

2. See Peter Sloterdijk's very interesting Critique of Cynical Reason.

3. In the Conclusion to The Renaissance 196.