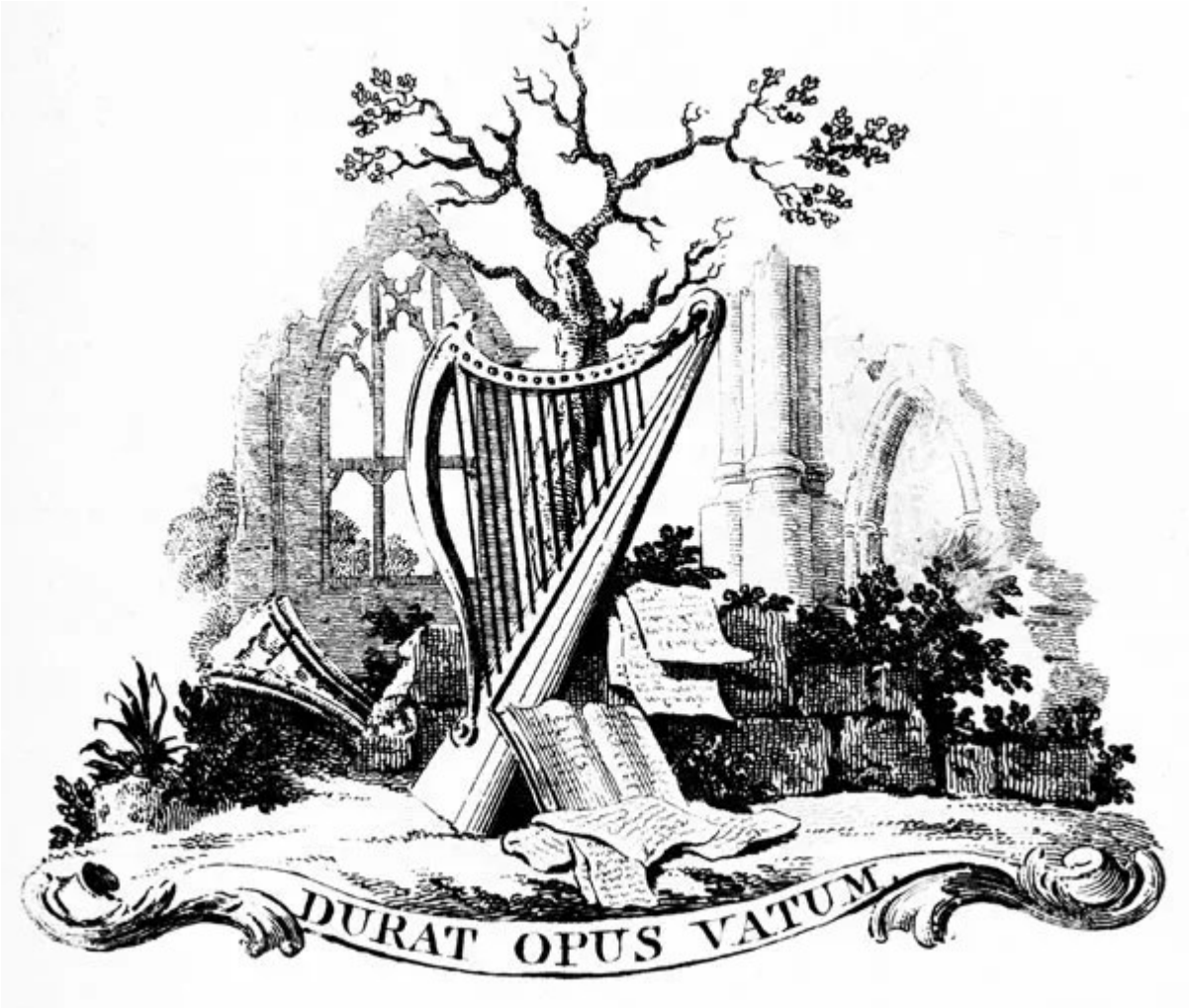
HYBRID HUMANITIES – BEN CULLEN



On the anniversary of the untimely and sudden death of Ben Cullen in 1995.

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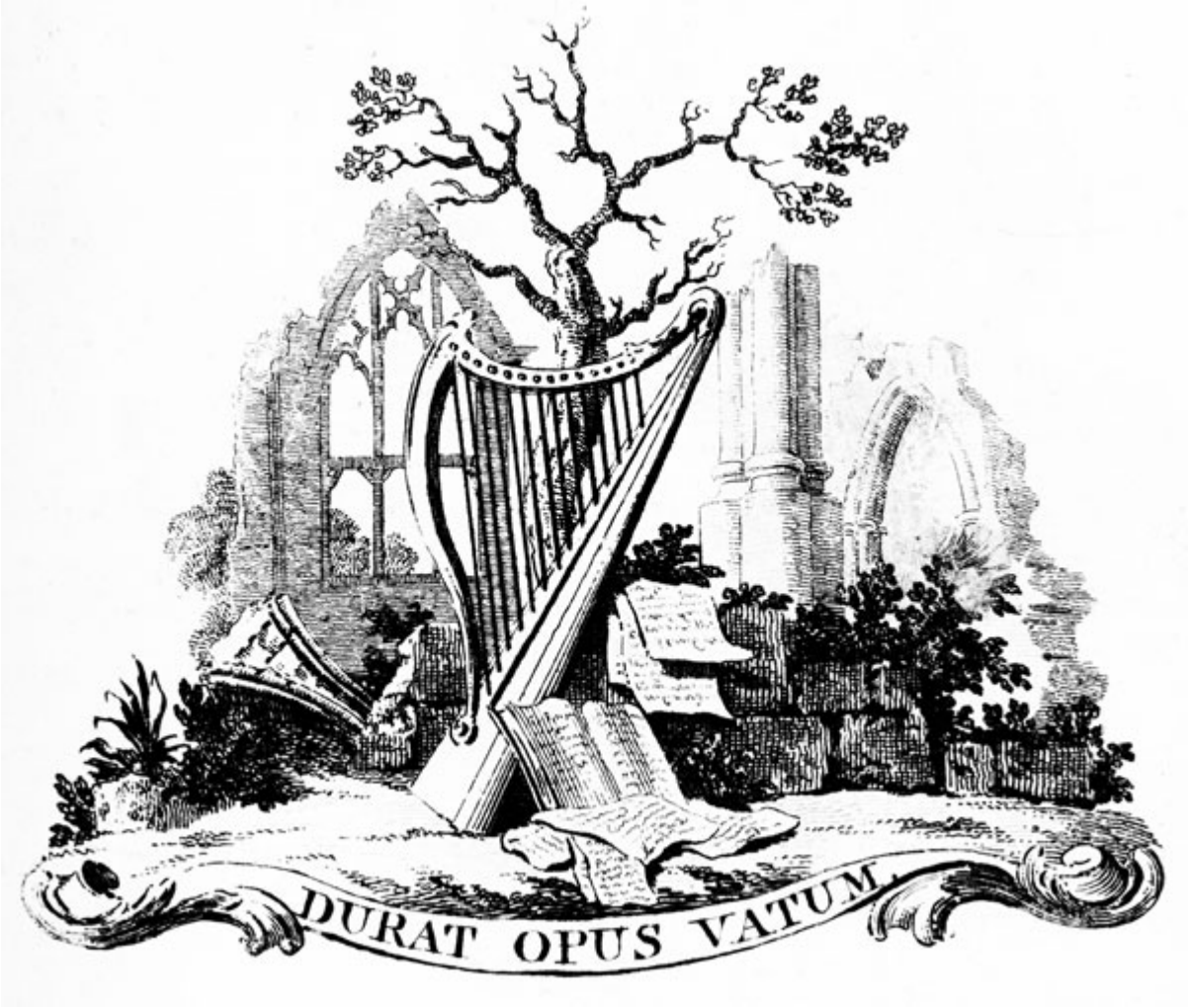
Ben Cullen thought beyond conventional distinctions under a fresh evolutionary notion of humanity as deeply hybrid – material and immaterial, personhood and artifact, species and thing. Humanity: an undecidable, in Derrida's sense. The lens through which he approached such questions – viral phenomena, beyond the biological.

This is such a refreshing and vital perspective for those interested in the future

of the (academic) Humanities, when a growing crisis about their scope and character is centered precisely upon how we conceive of human being and its study – see my recent entry on declining numbers of students in the Humanities – [Link] also, more generally – [Link]. Too many want to retrench the Humanities in letters and the arts, in (high) culture, emphasizing the old distinctions between the Humanities and Sciences, worlds of people *versus* nature, culture *versus* technology. Repeated is the old and simple exhortation: read books, because they delve the depths of the human condition. OK, but so limiting.

This year I finished, with Bjørnar Olsen, Tim Webmoor and Christopher Witmore, our book *Archaeology: the Discipline of Things* (University of California Press), and my own *The Archaeological Imagination* (Left Coast Press). Both follow Ben's suspicion of Cartesian dualisms and treat human being as distributed through rich and indeterminate networks of *people-and-things*. This doesn't square with our current disciplines and questions the very validity of the Humanities, but in a positive way – because a new Humanities focused upon hybrid human being will be central to any address to real-world issues that includes people, which means just about any issue that matters. I have commented much about human-centered design thinking, as practiced in our d.school, as a manifestation of such a new Humanities [Link]. Ironically perhaps, and as we point out in our book, the corollary of human-centered engineering is thing-centered Humanities that understands our materiality.

The Archaeological Imagination explores the world of eighteenth-century antiquarians in the Borders between England and Scotland before radical distinctions set in between disciplines in the Humanities and Sciences – mélanges of memories and material remains, human landscapes and physical geologies, natural histories of local plants and animals, family genealogies, collections of manuscripts and artifacts, itineraries through pasts-in-presents. Even in what became something of a homage to Walter Scott, the antiquarian inventor of the historical novel, I couldn't help but think of Ben, and the book is dedicated to him.



Thomas Percy, Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and other Pieces of our earlier Poets, (Chiefly of the Lyric kind.) Together with some few of later Date. London: Printed for J. Dodsley in Pall-Mall. First Edition, 1765. Ex Libris Michael Shanks.

The title page: “the work of poets endures”. It is, ironically, the voice and music’s notes that carry history; buildings fall into ruin and our writings disperse on the wind. And when the poet is *vates*, prophet and visionary, reading signs, past and present, of what is to come.

A great antiquarian debate in the eighteenth century concerned the essential role of poetic conjecture in what we now call scientific modeling – and this included historical reconstruction.