
FORUM

On the Crisis of Self-Definition in English Studies

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The final decades of the twentieth century witnessed a profusion of books, journal articles, and conferences earnest and frequently dogmatic in their attempts to map, interpret, and define the ever-untidy topography of English studies. Distinct in their impassioned pleas either to scrap racist, classist, sexist practices in literary studies or, to the contrary, to preserve the legacy of Western culture in English education, the chief pugilists on either side of the quarrel are unified by the urgency and totality of their polemics. Lamenting academic practices in the humanities, Gertrude Himmelfarb, for example, calls postmodernism not just “revisionary,” but “revolutionary” (143), while Henry Louis Gates Jr. has vowed “to fight against anyone who tries to drag us back” to traditional literary practices (21). With equal enthusiasm, John Ellis’ provocative *ubi sunt, Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities*, warns of “a startling decline in the intellectual quality of work in the humanities and a descent into intellectual triviality and irrelevance that amounts to a betrayal of the university as an institution” (228). Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* is equally elegiac: “The shadows lengthen in our evening land, and we approach the second millennium expecting further shadowing” (16). At the close of the twentieth century, disputants on either side of the “culture war” are as divided about the nature, value, and purpose of literary studies as they are contentious.

At first blush it seems odd, perhaps even masochistic, that the profession’s luminaries would quarrel over questions of self-definition when literary studies appear to face more immediate concerns. One might have thought that in the face of increasing student enrollments and declining levels of funding, a depressed job market, the inability of young professors when they do find employment to earn a humane salary, and the decline of the tenured-faculty model in favor of an anxi-

ety-provoking corporate model that relies increasingly on out-sourced labor — e.g., graduate student teaching assistants and full and part-time non-tenured faculty — that the culture war within English departments would have been set aside and the wagons circled in defense of the profession. With all the heady and knowing talk about politics in English departments, those who decry the ideological and political underpinnings of literary production and lay bare the hegemonic underbelly of our civil institutions might have unleashed their theoretical acumen to ensure the viability of their own profession. Instead of passing paper resolutions aimed at righting social injustice in the third world, professional organizations might have formed political action committees to lobby local, state, and federal governments on behalf of their professorate and profession.

For most literary scholars, it would seem, politics is not as Aristotle knew it, the art of grasping what is possible; it is instead the artistry of theorizing the improbable. In truth, academics may never possess the passion or the pragmatic political ingenuity of, say, auto workers. Witness the recent call to arms by Yale's Peter Brooks: "My plea ... is that we teachers of language and literature eschew undue modesty in the competition for a place in the curriculum, in the allocation of university resources, and in public discourse" (1957). Fine sentiment, but not exactly the type of empowering rhetoric that strikes the body, much less the spirit, into action. Indeed, wresting greater funds from the clutches of parents, administrators, and state legislators may take something slightly more potent than professor Brooks' eschewing "undue modesty."

What is at stake in the culture war, or so many believe, is much more significant than the economic viability of the profession. In his 1996 forward to Richard Ohmann's *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*, Gerald Graff writes that with the "massive expansion of American democratic education in this century, school and college English teachers have considerable opportunity to shape the way young Americans talk, write, and think about the world" (ix). More specifically, if perhaps more cynically, philosopher John Searle argues that following the upheavals of the 1960s, activists became convinced "that high culture in general and university departments of literature in particular could become important weapons in the struggle to overcome racism, imperialism, et cetera" (701).

Educators have forever believed that the future rests within the grasp of those who control the linguistic development of the young. This was, to be sure, Plato's motivation for banning poets from his ideal state. Quintillian had something of the sort in mind in his *Institutio oratorio* when he said, "let not the talk of a child's nurse be ungrammatical" (11), as did Erasmus in his *De pueris instituendis* when he counseled parents that ancient stories in the ears of children are "not only for

the study of language, but also as a guide to practical thinking and as a source of good vocabulary” (95). Twentieth-century rhetorician and historian of ideas Richard Weaver put it best in his 1948 *Ideas Have Consequences*: “The feeling that to have power over language is to have control over things is deeply imbedded in the human mind” (148). To mold, influence, and cultivate a generation’s linguistic house of being, to make over the way tomorrow’s leaders will think, talk, and write about the world, is thus the disputed territory in the recent war over culture.

Still, must the battle over the mode and method of the linguistic and literary education of tomorrow’s teachers, managers, and leaders necessarily result in the balkanization and finally the demise of literary studies today? Speaking at a time similarly divided over the nature and future of liberal education, John Henry Newman reminded his potentially hostile Dublin audience of the value of seeking common ground. “Compromise,” Newman lectured, “in a large sense of the word, is the first principle of combinations; and anyone who insists on enjoying his rights to the full, and his opinions without toleration for his neighbor’s, and his own way in all things, will soon have all things altogether to himself, and no one to share them with him” (22). There are, as Newman later points out, obvious limits to this sentiment. Nevertheless, if the present crisis of self-definition results in the eventual undoing of literary studies as a serious and worthy academic pursuit, it will be of little solace to ask forty years hence whether or not there were, in retrospect, combinations and concessions that could have doused the present conflagrations. Are battle lines in the conflict over culture so rigid that they will not admit of common ground in the field of literary studies?

While the culture war in English studies is at heart a dispute over the nature, content, and purpose of linguistic and literary education, the battlefronts are more recently and more frequently defined by conflicts over political correctness, affirmative action, equity, oppression, the canon, colonialism, multiculturalism, and a host of other concerns. For those seeking common ground, to engage the culture war on the level of these issues will always produce more heat than light, as the seemingly endless run of impassioned books, articles, conferences, and talk shows, remind. Political issues that run along the pulse of human passions will no more likely be resolved, and are not necessarily better dealt with, by English academics than they have been by the run of humanity throughout time. Yet, the fact that these issues have found a particularly welcoming home in departments of English says something important about the institutional history and nature of literary studies.

A first step in finding common ground within the field is to recognize that wringing one’s hands over the moral and practical merit of reading books as a se-

rious academic pursuit appears to be a defining characteristic of literary studies. Since the early nineteenth century when the first professors of English were installed at London University and King's College, English studies has never been able to take itself for granted. As D.J. Palmer writes in his history of the discipline, "well-worn controversies about the scope and purpose of the subject perennially divide those engaged in teaching it" (1). In the absence of any common understanding about the subject, method, and purpose of literary studies, the field has not only tended toward confusion and conflict, it has absorbed methods, theories, and habits from a variety of other disciplines, trends, and social and political movements. This has not only made literary studies a refuge for dispossessed ideas, it has also fostered resentment and deep reservations about the legitimacy of the field and the value of literary education, even by its own practitioners. Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, for example, writes at length to show that "literature does not exist" in any meaningful way (1-16). Further, the inherent worth of close reading and deep literary reflection as enterprises redeeming in themselves, as meritorious activities independent of material ends, has attracted precious few disciples, and has never sat well with moralists, utilitarians, and political activists. When defining the method and purpose of literary education, much less the term "literature," the course of literary studies never has run smooth.

Even those in the Age of Victoria, who today would be considered partisans of the self-evident merit of English studies, at times had deep reservations about the nature of literary habits, not to mention their status as an academic discipline. In defense of "elegant" and "polite" education, John Henry Newman, for example, wrote in a sermon entitled "The Danger of Accomplishments" that "[t]here are those persons who doubt whether what are called 'accomplishments,' whether in literature or in the fine arts, can be consistent with a deep and practical seriousness of mind" (152). The "danger," Newman supposed, was that liberal learning threatened to separate feeling from acting, that after reading a novel, "We have nothing *to do*; we read, are affected, softened or roused, and that is all: we cool again — nothing comes of it" (154).

Newman himself later countered these apprehensions in his *Idea of A University*, where he articulates the classic defense of liberal learning for its own sake: "Knowledge ... is valuable for what its very presence in us does after the manner of a habit, even though it be turned to no further account, nor subserve any direct end" (95). Further, Newman's early apprehension may be dispelled as a reaction against a certain Evangelical temperament which he believed, having gone through an Evangelical-style conversion when he was fifteen, concentrated too much on feeling and words rather than acts and deeds (Ker 17). Yet Newman's questioning

of the utility of English studies, whether or not it motivates action, and whether or not that action can be put to any good use, is a question that dogged the study of English throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

At the opening of Josiah Mason's Science College at Birmingham in 1880, Thomas Huxley, a fellow of the Royal Society, argued that "[f]or the purpose of attaining real culture, an exclusively scientific education is at least as effectual as an exclusively literary one" (528). While Huxley was more concerned about "classical" literary training based in Greek and Latin than about literary study in the English vernacular, his emphasis on "scientific training" as a means of attaining "real" culture helped to establish a view of vernacular literary studies as an endeavor secondary to the practical education of college students. Thus, at Josiah Mason's Science College "[p]arty politics are forbidden ... theology is as sternly banished from its precincts; and finally, it is especially declared that the College shall make no provisions for 'mere literary education'" (527). There is in Huxley a sense, as there is in recent polemics, that literary education is not "dangerous" provided that it leads to and is directed toward action, as Newman's sermon suggested. Those who justify the academic study of English as a practical enterprise, as job training for technical and legal writers and other commercial enterprises or, similarly, as preparation for political or social activism, would seem to be the heirs of Huxley's utilitarian view of higher education.

Matthew Arnold is often juxtaposed to Huxley as a defender of literary studies, yet even Arnold offers little encouragement for literary studies solely in the vernacular. His familiar definition of culture, which is rooted in the inscription at Delphi, is that we know ourselves and the world by way of a study of the best which has been thought and said. For Arnold, culture is not a matter of choice, but a matter of our finer nature. As he lectured throughout the United States in 1883-1884, he therefore argued that he could not believe "that humane letters are in much actual danger of being thrust out from their leading place in education.... If they lose for a time, they will get it back again. We shall be brought back to them by our wants and aspirations" (501). Yet Arnold's notion of literary training encompassed a great deal more than what is today the province of English literature.

While Arnold's study of culture is anchored in Greece and Rome, the best of what is thought and said also included the modern nations, and a study of both antiquity and modernity is much more than the study of *belles lettres*. "To know Italian *belles lettres* is not to know Italy, and to know English *belles lettres* is not to know England" (491). Literary study also included the methodical consideration of such things as a nation's military, political, legal, and public administration achievements. Given these and many of Arnold's other interests, such as his desire

to preserve Irish language and literature, one suspects that today the much maligned partisan of culture would have been a proponent of some brand of interdisciplinary and multicultural approaches to literary studies. In sum, Arnold's study of literature was not limited to English or even to modern literature, nor was literary training exclusively focused on *belles lettres*. Study of English literature, as well as science, was for Arnold only a very small part of the best of what had been thought and said. Nevertheless, Arnold's view of literary education as something essential to the attainment of culture is quite a departure from Huxley's more pragmatic view of liberal arts.

The questions that vexed Newman, Huxley, and Arnold over the utility of literary studies, its place and relationship to the other liberal arts, and the debate between scientific and humanistic education, finds something of a corollary in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. In his popular *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*, Herbert Spencer argued that "[s]cience is necessary not only for the most successful production, but also for the full appreciation of the fine arts" (72). Spencer claimed that science was at the root of sculpture, painting, music, and poetry, that science itself was poetic, and that "science opens up realms of poetry where to the unscientific all is a blank" (71). What is so irresistible about Spencer's determinism is that he argues his case with the same force and *a priori* certainty as those today who claim that politics, or economics, or sociology lie beneath all of literature, all of culture. Essentialist explanations of culture will forever rush in to fill the void left by those who find in human creativity a mysterious and therefore inexplicable spark of the divine.

Spencer's ideas, despite their wild popularity, yielded sharp rebuke from critics like Irving Babbitt who saw in them nothing more than narrow-minded determinism. In *Literature and the American College* Babbitt maintained that Spencer's brand of scientism, which had its roots in the Baconian idea of progress, was in kind with Rousseau's sentimentalism. "The scientific and sentimental naturalists are sharply at variance on many points," Babbitt claimed, "but in their views on education they often coincide curiously" (95). Votaries of progress require the brand of liberty and individualism found in Rousseau in order to justify a practical curriculum required by the ever-changing needs of industry, consumerism, political activism, and the periodic whims and intellectual fashions of academics, administrators, and students. As literary studies became overwhelmed by Spencer's hard literalism on the one hand and Rousseau's cult of nature on the other, Babbitt concluded that "the humanities themselves have ceased to be humane" (119).

Newman's uncertainty over whether or not the study of literature leads one to action, the dispute between Huxley and Arnold over the means and ends of liter-

ary education, and Babbitt's rebuke of Spencer's scientific basis of culture only begin to suggest the breadth and spirit of the controversy over the means and ends of literary education. Many of these "older" contests, however, resonate in subsequent and more familiar efforts to "politicize" the curriculum, in efforts to make literary studies more practical by marketing it as a footstep in a career of life-long learning and total employment, and in more traditionalist efforts, such as those embodied in E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* or in Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. All of these enterprises contribute to the dialectic about self-definition. In other words, what defines literary studies, in part, is constant debate over what defines literary studies: what it is, what it does, and what it ought to do. Setting aside the ceaseless quarrels within the field over the merit of various critical and interpretive methods, the discipline has defined itself in its constant debate over self-definition. For those in literary studies who seek common ground in the war over culture or, to the contrary, for those strident in their efforts to, as Newman put it, "have it their own way," recognition of literary studies as an ongoing crisis of self-definition has a number of salutary implications.

First, understanding literary studies as a dialectic about self-definition addresses one of the perennial and most divisive problems in literary studies, defining the term "literature," by proposing a functionalist definition. The problem with ontological definitions of "literature" — definitions that describe what literature "is" — has been that they are too restrictive on the one hand or too inclusive on other: the former disallows too many texts, the latter too few. In light of this problem, many critics, such as Eagleton, have rightly concluded that defining what literature "is" is fruitless (1-16). From this, however, it does not follow that literature does not exist. Rather, it may mean that our way of defining literature is faulty. In *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis*, John Ellis argues that literature may be defined as much by common purpose, what it does, rather than by common properties, what it is (37-42). If literature is thus defined in terms of how it functions, it follows that literature exists, at minimum, in its ability to provoke constant discussion over its nature, purpose, and ends. How little sense there is in arguing that something doesn't exist when the thing in question has been and continues to be the subject of so much strife or, conversely, when the thing in question is defined by the strife that it has provoked. Further, the steady flow of polemics in the recent war over culture bears witness to the power of literature to provoke self-reflection, serious deliberation, and to reflect and to prompt a range of human aspirations, emotions, and desires. Literature exists and is defined by the constant debate over its utility and purpose.

Second, a longer view of the present disagreements in literary studies within the context of historical animosities over the nature and purpose of literary education suggests that, far from resolving such issues, the field will continue to be defined by virtue of its disagreements, as they are germane to its very function: literature is defined, as it has been argued, by its ability to provoke disagreement, among other things. This briefest glance at previous strife within literary studies also implies that the particular issues and arguments in the present war over culture will subside. Literary studies will ever be muddled in questions of self-definition, but the subject and terms of such questions will tend to reflect the broader social, political, and economic concerns of the greater society, as they did in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For traditionalists disturbed by the very terms of the present debate, one is reminded of Robert Alter's observation that "any healthy tradition lives by being the constant object of critical scrutiny and interpretive revision" (511). What is further suggested here is that the serious study of literature is greater than any particular critical scrutiny or interpretive revision. Great literature, as Harold Bloom insists, has a way of rendering its interpreters anachronistic (25). Ironically, the very debate over the merit and purpose of studying, say, Shakespeare is testimony to the enduring nature of his plays and poetry. This is less a function of any particular critic or mode of criticism than it is a quality of those literary works that provide their readers with something worth arguing over. While "traditional" approaches, methods, and subjects may, as Arnold pointed out, "lose for a time, they will get it back again" (501).

For those, like professor Gates, avowed "to fight against anyone who tries to drag us back" to traditional literary practices (21), there is considerable anecdotal evidence that traditional literary practices are indeed on the rise. The popularity of recent works like Daniel E. Ritchie's *Reconstructing Literature in an Ideological Age*, suggests at least a modest revival. More provocative, however, is a recent *New York Times* article on the new-found popularity of great books programs (Steinberg A1). What is noteworthy is that the return to great books programs is happening not at "cutting edge" English departments, but at community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and state universities, where student populations are ethnically diverse, and where the students come from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. A return to traditional literary habits is happening, it would seem, from the bottom up. Steinberg reports that at Wilbur Wright College, a predominantly Black and Hispanic school on Chicago's North side, the popularity of the great books program "would seem to rebut those critics who have long dismissed the relevance of [great books] courses" (A1). Whether or not this will prove to be the case, the

apparent return to great books programs is another chapter in the voluminous debate over the merit and utility of literary studies.

Finally, the profusion of books, journal articles, and conferences in the last decades of the twentieth-century concerned with various aspects of the culture war related to literary studies, tacitly imply that the field itself is in an uncharacteristic crisis of self-definition. The argument here has been that far from being uncharacteristic, the present crisis is typical of the nature of literary studies and reflects an ongoing concern over the value and purpose of literary education. Discord, contention, and crisis not only characterize the history of literary studies, when they are grounded in genuine academic freedom, they will ensure its vitality. Complacency, rather than strife, is the bane of literary studies.*

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