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Searching for Authority

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The discourse around English departments stresses critical thinking and interpretation, new media, inter-disciplinarity and innovative pedagogies. But the future of the English Department is, in a very real way, the men and women English Departments around the country will hire over the next few months. Candidates are asked to specialize in a time period, a geographical location, and specific kinds of texts. Just as importantly, they share an approach to intellectual activity.

We specialize in geographical regions because English literature is, still, mostly identified as British and American literature. This makes sense inasmuch as nobody can read everything. But we have to remember, too, that the study of literature has often been tied to nationalist or patriotic ends: consider the European search for national epics in the nineteenth century and America's search for the Great American Novel in the twentieth. And we specialize in time periods for the same reason: nobody can read everything, and English departments should be able to teach their students, at a minimum, the history of English language literature from Chaucer to Toni Morrison.

But in both time period and geographical location, the specialization seems to be without end rather than without cause. We do need to focus on one time period for the purposes of teaching graduate students; on the other hand, teachers of contemporary literature should have the skill set needed to teach *all* literature to undergraduates, and to notice interesting and research-worthy details in *all* texts. The specialization we see now — where, for instance, a candidate for twentieth-century American jobs can apply for early modernist, mid-century, post-war, and post-1969 positions — distorts both our reading and our teaching. The literature of the eighteenth century, in particular, suffers from this: although its poets, novelists, and essayists have much to teach us about our world and our literature, rigid specialization means that it is rarely taught, trapped between the popular fields of Renaissance and Romantic literature, to which it provides a genuine, fascinating, and border-line unknown alternative. Similarly, geographical restriction distorts our understanding of English and American authors: Faulkner is the most American of writers, but even he claimed Joyce, Mann, Cervantes, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy as his most important influences.

The focus on texts written by minorities is far more justifiable. The expansion of the canon is one of recent English scholarship's most important achievements; rare indeed is the syllabus without texts by previously under-represented groups. But the method we seem to have chosen for this reformation is puzzling. Scholars are now asked to specialize in literatures by minorities, which leads to new forms of exclusion.

Ghettoization can be a progressive moment: if a group has had no space, providing a space specifically for that group is important. But it is a step. As an end point, it encourages us to compartmentalize literature even more. We can keep the differently colored or differently gendered separate in our minds and studies, save for a token Latina on the 101 syllabus.

A stranger version of the specific kind of text specialization comes in the proliferation of jobs for specialists in poetry and drama. Sociologically, this makes sense, because poetry and drama have lost so much of their influence over the last forty years. But it is simply not possible to study literature before about 1980 — and in most languages other than English, not possible at all — without reading a range of poetry and drama alongside prose. To return to the eighteenth century, Swift's greatest achievements straddle the almost-but-not-quite novel, lyric, and satirical prose and poetry. More recently, it's hard to understand Pound or Beckett without Joyce; hard to understand much postmodern prose without the modernist poets. Many professors of 'fiction' are simply unaware of the state of poetry in America, and the professors of poetry — often, of course, poets — are shut off from much of the most important research and teaching in prose.

But the most worrying aspect of the Department's future comes in our common understanding of intellectual activity. In short, our theoretical approaches are chosen not due to their practical results (i.e., they do not help us better to understand texts or world). They are fuelled by a crisis of confidence.

Like all institutions, the English Department needs authority and legitimacy in order to fulfill its tasks. In the past, particularly thanks to the GI Bill, critics took on the mantle of cultural arbiter or defenders of the literary tradition. This was tied in with the parochialism discussed above, and, in the sixties and seventies, critics and theorists quite rightly started to question this authority. One welcome outcome was the expansion of the canon. One side-effect was that the old authority and legitimacy of the English Department was, bit by bit, demolished. In its place we set the authority of critique, and ran through structuralism, post-structuralism, neo-Marxism, feminism, gay rights, anti-racism, and New Historicism all in the space of one structuralist's lifetime. The study of English, which had previously been seen as one of the valuable privileges of a liberal democratic society, was revealed, too often accurately, to be an ideological prop for a *soi-disant* liberal democratic society. The study of theory, on the other hand, became a weapon in the fight against society. But why should an English department be dedicated to the study of one very small sub-field of philosophy? And can we justify the existence of such a department? Clearly not. Hence a crisis of confidence: how to legitimize the existence of the English Department? From what authority do we speak?

Now consider the most recent boom industries in literary study. Evolutionary criticism accepts the claim that scientific method — an explicitly non-hermeneutic approach to study — can inform us about things that, we previously thought, require hermeneutic approaches. Area studies has exploded, expanding and splintering, to continue the

compartmentalization of literature, without any sense that that process itself might be harmful. Digital Humanities, when used as a battle-cry, should give anyone who's read the Benjamin/Adorno debate on film a heart attack.

Why are these three trends — all much desired specializations, and not only in English departments — so prominent in the humanities? Because they are all ways to claim authority as scholars. The intersection between science and literature makes it possible for us to claim that we are producing socially valuable knowledge: science is, as we all know, the source of all knowledge. Area studies allows us to claim authority as liberal democrats, continuing the fight for canon expansion, albeit with ever diminishing returns (and ever greater ghettoization: not only is literature in Spanish cut off from literature in English, literature in Spanish by Chicanos is cut off from literature in English by Puerto-Rican-Americans and so on). Transatlantic studies gives the appearance of inter-disciplinarity and historical importance, but doesn't require any genuine challenge to the department's parochialism. Digital Humanities can be easily explained to boosters, politicians and administrators — it prepares students for life in a digital age. By definition it requires innovative (for which read, far too often, 'cheaper') teaching methods and a focus on new media, which are both fiscally rewarding buzzwords.

Thus we can legitimize our highly privileged positions in society: students are helped by English Departments to become scientifically informed, high-functioning global digital citizens in our ever-increasingly diverse and media saturated world.

What we do not do, it appears, is read widely or with depth. Literature as an object of value fell between the cracks of critique and self-preservation. I like to think that what professors really want, really will be doing in the future, is reading Sappho or Césaire aloud to freshman. I like to think that, perhaps, all this isn't our fault: isn't the University to blame, with its bureaucracy requiring more and more money and time from its students, and, therefore, more and more utilitarianism from its faculty? Isn't the government little better, politicians having newly defined 'citizen' and 'successful graduate' both as 'productive employee'? Certainly. But for all that, the future of the English Department looks grim indeed if not even we are willing to say, simply, that the Department's function is the teaching and reading of literature from around the world, in all its genres and modes, from ancient prayer to Youtube, and that we do this in order to preserve what is worth preserving, and, crucially, to criticize that which is not.