

# The New and the Noteworthy and the Making of a Civil Society

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**T**O ANSWER THE QUESTIONS posed to us by the editors of this collection, we undertook a survey of similar efforts at reassessing the state of the discipline. Along with the Guillory and Butler collection upon which this volume is modeled, we took a look at leading theoretical journals—*Critical Inquiry*, *Poetics Today* and *New Literary History*—that have been engaged in efforts similar to our own. What’s in, what’s out, what’s left of literary studies? We thought we’d lay it all out in an academic fashionista’s “style file.”

OUT	FIVE MINUTES AGO	IN
representation	interpellation	imagination
knowledge	senses	cognition
textuality	performativity	poetics
bodies	mimics	souls
history	anthropology	neuroscience
anxiety	pleasure	faith
national	postcolonial	transnational
matrices	trajectories	ecologies
others	selves	DNA
commodities	things	relics
discourse	speech	myth
the hegemonic	the everyday	the sacred

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The contents of this handy guide to scholarly chic, not to mention the decision to produce it in the first place, suggest that if there is anything left of English Studies, it certainly isn't the *Left*. The modes of critical analysis associated with the New Historicism and with Cultural Studies are, it seems, going the way of the power suit. And for those of us schooled in the 1990s by the acolytes of Derrida and Foucault, perusing the landscape of the new and the noteworthy can have the same effect on the scholarly self-image as the glossy pages of *Wallpaper* and *InStyle* have on the wardrobe. We found ourselves feeling a bit like Reese Witherspoon's character in *Legally Blonde*. "Don't stomp your little last season's Prada shoes at me, honey," says the cheekily hip antagonist. And like Witherspoon's Elle, we are tempted to gasp in defiant horror: "My shoes are NOT last season's!" Our first response to this whole enterprise was thus predictable. Presented with the task of looking at cutting edge scholarship, we prepared to launch into a discussion of the infection of literary academia by postmodern commodity culture's ceaseless thirst for the cutting edge—a discussion made all the more cogent, we felt, by the university infrastructure's recent imperatives: the humanities, we keep getting told, must "change." We must embrace "innovation." But this first impulse to embrace "left" critique led to some questions: What guise are we wearing that makes us look so desperately in need of a change? Whose "innovative" fashions are we being asked to follow instead? The answers are not as straightforward as our "Out" modes of analysis would lead us to expect.

If the rhetoric of SSHRC administrators is to be believed we really are looking quite frumpy these days, like people who hang around the house in track pants. SSHRC President Marc Renaud, in his address given to the 2002 Canadian Association of Graduate Studies conference ("The Human Sciences: The Challenge of Innovation"), notes that "[s]ince the Second World War, disciplinary specialization and peer-reviewed publications have framed the academic world" and as a result "scholars have come to be perceived as being lodged in ivory tower silos, driven more by their abstract interests than by a will to contribute to the larger public good. Add to this perception the massive increase in student enrolment and the drastic budgetary cutbacks of the 1980s and the 1990s, and inevitably you get a research community in which several participants feel defensive, unfamiliar with how to operate outside their disciplinary traditions and unwilling to change." Renaud goes on to recommend a drastic makeover. The plan is to "open up the research agenda," to inspire us to "reach beyond [our] disciplines" in order to "solve problems" and eventually "create international research teams" that will take us "beyond academia" and will make

“better use of leading-edge technologies” while training “more students at advanced levels and more quickly” (Renaud 7–9).

If the university of the twenty-first century has defined itself almost exclusively by its ability to be “leading edge,” we in the humanities apparently fall short. Nor would we necessarily disagree that we fall short. Despite our penchant for radically rethinking our discipline every ten years or so, we have pretty much assumed that the rhetoric of newness is either the domain of graduate students or evidence of administrative pandering to the government and corporate interests already driving research agendas in the sciences and the social sciences. But have we really so completely escaped the interest of the world outside our walls? As it happens, we in English Studies are not the only ones asking the question “What’s *left* of the humanities?”

Martha Piper, President of the University of British Columbia, is also asking this question. Her answers are both predictable and surprising. In a recent lecture, hosted by the Killam Trust, Dr Piper made the following claim for the importance of the humanities to the building of a civil society:

I want to press the point that poetry, philosophy and history, and all of the human sciences are critical to our ability as individuals to reflect on our mores, values, and heritage, and influence the ways in which we translate those reflections into action that will form the core or center piece of a civil society. (Piper 3)

It is worth emphasizing that Dr Piper’s vision has not been without influence. Her proposal to restructure SSHRC into “academies, colleges, institutes or alliances that focus on some of the most pressing civil society issues” has been partnered with Renaud’s crusade for innovation and is galvanizing structural change at the granting council. At a December 24th teleconference, the SSHRC board announced that it was “ready to embrace the challenge.” A task-force, consisting of SSHRC board members and representatives from the government, the private sector and the university, is to be set up. The board has also suggested that the government appoint co-chairs from outside SSHRC circles (i.e., from the private sector and the media [Charbonneau 27, 35]). Lest we think that this is an initiative that interests only bureaucrats, in a recent press release, Doug Owan, the President of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, commented: “And while SSHRC did not receive any additional funding to address its severe budget constraints, I am confident that the

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discussions the human sciences community are now engaging in—about the transformation of SSHRC—will result in viable, long-term solutions to our funding issues” (“Federal Budget”). That these changes threaten the time-honoured backbone of scholarly inquiry in the humanities, that they threaten to leave unfunded those projects that can’t make a case for their immediate social relevance—say, projects on medieval Latin or phenomenology or eighteenth-century furniture—suggests the urgency of investigating their precise terms.

On the one hand, Dr Piper’s liberal use of words like “freedom” and “value” is of the sort to arouse suspicion in anyone schooled in poststructuralist thinking and politics. The intent of Dr Piper’s speech can and has been construed as a reactionary return to the broadly defined humanism of the 1950s (there is a kind of local legend in our department that someone once stood up in a meeting and observed that we exist to “civilize the bomb builders”). The same kind of political dogmatism seems to drive Dr Piper’s desire to dust off a vintage value claim and resell it as an inspired new direction for a troubled world. She admits as much herself in her references to the terrifying incivility of recent times. The speech is further coloured by the sense that human sciences provide the placating art, theatre, music and literature that mediate the horror and soften the grittiness of contemporary life.

But it is also important to note that for all her seeming adherence to a bygone liberal arts objective, Piper is at pains to advocate “civility” in full recognition of the *contingency* of the word. Her remarks are worth quoting at length:

I am keenly aware that the very term “civil society” is a source of some dispute among moral philosophers and political scientists. “Civil society” has meant different things to different people at different times: thus, the Greeks and Romans saw it as based in natural reason, while Christian theologians saw it as emanating from divine law. And what we understand as “civil” in the workings of our society may differ radically from the understanding of those belonging to other cultures and religions.

While I am not a philosopher, please allow me to offer a simple working definition for the purposes of this talk: I am defining a civil society as a vigorous citizenry engaged in the culture and politics of a free society. In this definition, the key agent of influence is neither the government nor the corporation, but rather the individual, acting alone or with others

to strengthen civic life. In turn, how individuals think about themselves and others, the values they espouse and enact, become the essential features of a civil society. (Piper 4)

It is possible to read this speech as an earnest attempt to wrest the humanities from ivory tower mythology—a mythology perpetuated by the persistent phenomenon of the solitary researcher pursuing esoteric inquiry. In other words, while the speech may be anathema to post-structuralist attempts to demystify foundational terms—terms like “civil” and “society”—the speech can also be seen as a vote in favour of cultural studies and its *left*-ish sensitivity to mechanisms of obfuscation.

Now, the two of us came to English Studies at precisely the moment when the discipline was in an earlier phase of re-thinking its *raison d'être*. The literary canon was opening up to the voices of women and to minority writers in new and unprecedented ways. We also came to see literature as a historically contingent vehicle for ideology and we learned that no piece of writing could be heralded for its espousal of universal truths. For us, literature became a suspect object of inquiry and we became denizens of the archive in our pursuit of the undervalued context. Because we both work in historical areas, we came to see that our job as scholars was to unpack the cultural work done by literature in the societies of the past and furthermore to understand the role these texts continue to perform, for better or for worse, today. Dr Piper's remarks suggest that our work has not been without influence. It is important to know our past, she argues, because “from the examples provided by literature and philosophy, we derive a sense of value and tradition, and of our own place in the continuum of human history. In assimilating these ideas, and making them our own, we transform them and build upon them to strengthen and improve the freedoms we have obtained over the centuries.”

The speech acknowledges that people and societies come to be understood largely through the scrutiny of traces that they leave behind them. Our own attempts to make something of these traces may not have been attempts to locate civility—in fact, more often than not, we have been interested in speaking to alienation, inequality, indifference in the face of mechanisms that mandate “civility”—but in our fixation upon dissonance and the affect of power we have always made a case for the social promise of our interpretive acts. The question, then, may not be “what's left of theory” but “what has theory left us”? If we want to make a case for our social relevance (and for the relevance of the material we study), then surely we can't afford to ignore or diminish the civic obligations that Dr Piper articulates.

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This said, however, there is something troubling in the President's formula for the pursuit of a civil society and we hope that we can pinpoint precisely what we think it is. Let us begin by noting that are several ironies here, not the least of which is Dr Piper's unacknowledged debt to the political agendas of humanities disciplines that she says have been of too little influence. Dr Piper, and Dr Renaud for that matter, are summoning a myth to which many of us subscribe: that what we do in rare book libraries or during solitary sessions before the computer screen, has little value to the quotidian lives of the majority of North Americans. But is this really the case? And if it is, how is it that Piper and Renaud came to be wearing our last season's shoes? Let's shift our focus for a moment from the picture of the solitary, individual researcher—whose claims to civic contributions must necessarily be thin—to what the humanities in general, fuelled by highly esoteric post-structuralist theory, have accomplished in the way of widespread social and cultural contributions over the last twenty years.

An admittedly clumsy and sweeping summary of this process might go like this: Seeded in American ivy league schools in the mid-1970s, poststructuralist theory was initially propounded by a tiny priesthood of high intellectuals, isolated souls dedicated to importing Continental philosophy, social theory and psychoanalysis into traditional North American humanities fields. But this priesthood had acolytes—graduate students at first, then, by the mid-1980s as “theory” inevitably made its way into the classrooms of ivy league professors, undergraduates. The undergraduates of Yale, Columbia, Harvard, NYU or Chicago—largely the sons and daughters of America's most privileged families—did not uniformly move into PhD programs, thereby assuring theory's continued enclosure in a specialized community. They moved into a variety of illustrious professions and industries, including, most significantly, America's powerful and ubiquitous culture industries. The Hollywood culture industry is a good example. We typically think of Hollywood as an enclave of rather crude, self-made hucksters whose only thoughts are of the bottom line, but the Hollywood of today is ruled by ivy league degrees, most of them earned in the 1980s or 1990s, and most of them, if not actual humanities degrees, heavily larded with humanities courses—courses in English, film studies, American studies, gender studies, history. These people were taught by their professors to value certain kinds of aesthetic objects. As they assumed positions of authority in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they began to patronize films and filmmakers that meshed with what they had been taught was cutting-edge culture. The signature films of the early 1990s, whether green-lighted by Hollywood creative executives or bought

up at festivals by a new generation of savvy distributors, featured the “politically correct” identity issues and self-referential formal experimentation lauded in the postmodern classroom: *Thelma and Louise*; *Philadelphia*; *The Crying Game*; *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; *The Piano*; *Pulp Fiction*; *The English Patient*. In television, where writers (that is, people with film studies, creative writing and English degrees) hold executive power, the transformation to postmodern forms has been even more radical: *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer*; *X-Files*; *24*; *Alias*; even the slew of “reality” shows whose most titillating feature, after all, is the actual degree of reality they bother to include.

One could make the same argument for the field of journalism, where the soldiers of the 1980s culture wars (educated in the humanist formalism of the 1960s) were summarily vanquished in the early 1990s by the more freshly-minted graduates presiding over *Wired*, *Salon*, *Nerve* and their ilk. Now you pick up a *Time* magazine and find yourself treated to the words from your own lectures: a 2002 article on Elvis informs us, “[o]ur famous American dead accrue layers of interpretation through the years and become palimpsests of cultural meaning” (Siegel). Alien to the general public only fifteen years ago, “theory,” thanks to journalists educated in it, now shapes the way we read political events. When video footage of the Gulf War hit North American TV screens in 1991, cultural studies academics pounced on it as evidence of the highly mediated character of the whole U.S. war effort. Ten years later when the first footage from the 9/11 disaster was aired, it wasn’t academics but journalists educated by these academics who were making this same observation: the footage looked like a Hollywood film. The same is true for the field of visual arts. Promoted by radical critics like Laura Mulvey, “theory” flourished in art colleges in the 1970s, formed a bedrock for edgy conceptual artists and photographers in the early 1980s, and finally trickled down to inspire the current self-referential trends among fashion photographers—readily available to us all in the pages of *Vogue*. And finally, the same is true for “literature.” Accustomed to being treated as the poor relations of the university family, literature professors forget that their classrooms have fuelled what is now a massive industry in “literary” objects, especially “experimental” (modernist and post-modernist-inspired) literary objects. Exposed to the pleasures and complexities of literature by lit requirements in university and college curricula, millions of our students are now lining Oprah’s pockets, paying money to see renditions of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Jane Austen and Henry James on the big screen, and buying up novels that

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borrow from the likes of Faulkner and Pynchon. “Literature” right now is enjoying a popularity unseen since the nineteenth century.

Dr Piper’s insistence that we attune ourselves to contemporary civil society, in other words, fails to take into account (understandably, since we fail in this regard ourselves) that the humanities have, in a large measure, already shaped contemporary civil society. The students educated in humanities programs in the 1980s and 1990s now run Hollywood, run CNN, run *Time* and *Vogue*, run the History Channel, HBO, and the CBC. As fans, information geeks, hobbyists and amateur scholars, they produce most of the non-commercial content on the web. As consumers these college and university grads demand gender, ethnic and race equity in their programming and journalism; they demand political and aesthetic complexity and they delight in self-referential play of the sort reality TV provides. There is, at the very least, something redundant about Dr Piper’s and SSHRC’s attempts to legislate civic responsiveness. Focused on the seemingly inefficient spectre of the solitary scholar producing an arcane monograph every ten years, these administrators overlook the fact that the solitary scholar in some sense doesn’t exist. He or she is perforce part of a scholarly community—and thus part of a collective force that works from the small to the large, that begins with isolated individuals and coterie working on esoteric topics in relative isolation and then spreads via our disciplinary apparatus—research, conferences, journal articles, monographs, supervision and teaching—to shape the contours of North American thought and culture as a whole, including, ironically, Dr Piper’s thoughts. The fashions we are being asked to follow are our own.

But more than simply being redundant, Dr Piper’s plan for a corporately imposed humanities agenda threatens to undo the civic work she wants the humanities to do. For all our facetiousness in presenting a picture of what’s in and what’s out in literary studies, our table makes an important point. Right now, humanities studies is moving *away* from the methods and objects of study that have predominated in our disciplines over the last twenty years. New attention to formalist procedures and aesthetics, visits to cognitive science, linguistics and evolutionary psychology, a revived interest in “myth” criticism, in early twentieth-century anthropology, and in humanism generally are replacing poststructuralism’s constructivist assumptions, along with its emphasis on contingency. At the very moment that Dr Piper would like us to acknowledge our socially contingent character as a field, that is, the field itself is starting to argue for the inadequacy of models of contingency to account for the richness and variety of the human imagination, for the mystery that is human

consciousness, and for the wonder that is art. Legislating, via SSHRC, our compliance with disciplinary models that may shortly prove obsolete, insisting that we tether ourselves to seemingly more “useful” fields like law or politics, not only neglects the extent to which we already shape thinking in these fields (post-structuralism, after all, started in the humanities and seeped off into law and politics), it cripples our ability to renew ourselves and to feed the manifold textures of our culture as both researchers and teachers. We might add that such legislative pressure is not part of the elite U.S. university system, where the assumption is that experts should be allowed to do their jobs as they see fit. At the very least we can, as humanists working in Canadian universities, look forward to a decline in our competitive edge. We can predict the absorption of the solitary scholar into large multi-disciplinary units capable of winning the massive grants with which SSHRC plans to replace its current monograph-driven granting system.

English Studies’ engagement with the political *Left* will no doubt change as individual scholars continue to consider and reconsider the possibilities and limitations of their discipline. The constant here is not our politics but our collective influence. There is no reason to imagine that a meaningful commitment to social change is impossible if critical practices embrace, to take one example, a new formalism. What’s left of English Studies, then, is not so much a politics as a shared commitment to creative momentum. There is nothing new about this commitment. It is as old as the institution of the university. But it is noteworthy, especially at this moment. The whole point is that we are a powerful, effective cohort. While our collaborations are not always formal ones, our critical engagements make us partners. In our articles and in our books we engage with each other, critique each other’s work; we form collective bonds and we commit ourselves to maintaining the coherence and fellowship that have, we believe, contributed so critically to the civil society we inhabit.

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