

What's Been Lost

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IT'S TOO SOON TO TELL whether the current boomlet in hiring is auguring a period of prosperity for Canadian universities. It's safe to say, though, that it won't bring about the long-promised wholesale renewal of the faculty, a rejuvenation that was supposed to occur in the 1990s and was to rival in scale what happened during the boon years of the 1960s. At least, it's beside the point to talk of rejuvenation in relation to a discipline like English, which isn't much like it was when hopefuls first began to predict the big renewal. Ere we had a chance to be reborn, we were restructured: departments have been downsized, classes have grown, journals have been cut, underemployment has risen, expectations have been lowered. I don't wish to present another litany of all the ways university life has been materially altered over the past two decades. I'm concerned, rather, with the intellectual consequences of these changes. My comments are speculative, since there's no way of knowing how things might have been different had the big renewal actually occurred. All the same, it seems insensitive to be issuing manifestoes on what's left of English studies without also pausing to reflect on what's been lost.

We do not lack for diagnoses of what's happened to English since the culture wars or the heyday of high theory (see Bérubé, Williams). Most of these diagnoses deal with how literary studies is practiced among those

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who have secure jobs. Few consider what effect downsizing has had not just on the conditions for teaching or research but on the nature of critical discourse. Clearly, the critical mass has gotten smaller: people have retired, been dissuaded from pursuing doctoral degrees, been blocked from publishing for lack of venues, dropped out of the market, or been forced into sessional work which affords them little time or incentive to contribute to debates in the field. At the same time, most graduate programs haven't been in a position to lower their numbers, given the ongoing need for teaching assistants to help staff undergraduate survey and service classes. This overproduction of PhDs relative to available positions has created a structural inequity wherein mid-career scholars appear outnumbered by their sessional, junior and senior colleagues. This isn't the case everywhere. But the inequity has affected most departments long enough that we may plausibly speak of a lost generation, an indefinitely large group of individuals who might have contributed to the discipline during the most productive period of their careers but who were prevented or discouraged from doing so.

It's not easy to measure this group, though I'm sure I'm not alone in knowing people who gave up on English because the jobs weren't there. More difficult to assess is the effect of their absence on the discipline. One way of defining this lack would be to compare where the cuts have occurred with hiring patterns over the same period. Most departments did not suffer significant attrition before the mid-'90s, yet the subsequent cuts, in the form of non-replacements, hit shortly after the severest and longest job drought of the post-war era. For much of the previous two decades, there were almost no jobs, permanent or temporary. Those few positions that did open up were not commonly in the traditional period specialties¹ and, if they were, they were generally offered to candidates whose work applied theory to the interpretation of texts. Candidates were expected to announce their critical coordinates: Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, structuralism, poststructuralism and the rest. For a while, it looked like departments were moving to hire on the basis of methodology rather than subject area. One other notable hiring phenomenon of the decade was the emergence of the "pure theorist," who was hired to buttress a department's reputation in critical theory without necessarily being expected to use theory in "praxis," whether textual interpretation or social critique.

1 By period specialties I have in mind both the historical and national subdisciplines.

Theory's prestige, coupled with deepening job anxieties, made for a heightened disciple culture. Those few who did get jobs during the 1980s were not of sufficient number to challenge prevailing credos, and many felt obliged to align themselves with vanguards they did not create: most of that decade's quarrels (humanism vs. deconstruction), controversies (the de Man affair), and emergent approaches (new historicism, third-wave feminism) involved or were promoted by master teachers who had received their degrees at least a decade earlier. Meanwhile, the departmental mainstream, the core of traditional period specialties, remained stable yet largely closed to new members. This led to a weakening of ties to earlier scholarship: there weren't enough young critics entering the mainstream to reproduce its traditions of thought, while the push for theory made several of these traditions (formalism, pre-Althusserian Marxism, literary history) appear outmoded and easily dismissible in the service of self-definition. I suspect that the disciple culture, along with inflated expectations for research brought on by a buyer's market, also rendered less desirable a range of candidates who didn't quite fit the mainstream or its theoretical wings: generalists, idiosyncratic scholars, textual scholars, pure teachers. The teaching of composition was an option for some but, while emerging as a discipline in its own right, it was seen as a ghetto from which one had little chance to contribute to intellectual currents. The upshot of all these developments was both considerable waste, in the sheer number of those who didn't get the positions they wanted, and the entry into the profession of the smallest and least visible scholarly generation in living memory.

Jobs became less scarce by the late '80s but the rate of the market's expansion, which soon stalled, never matched earlier predictions. At the same time, hiring patterns changed dramatically, in response to both retirements from the mainstream and a widespread desire to place more women and minorities in university positions. A felt need to preserve the historical subdisciplines, combined with the goal of achieving gender and racial equity, led to women and minorities being hired to teach in the period specialties. This, in turn, entailed a shift in priority away from hiring on the basis of critical affiliations—indeed, openings for pure theorists virtually disappeared. Ideally new hires were to be versed in theory and emergent identity discourses such as gender studies. But credentials in high theory *per se* became less valuable than an ability to produce theoretically informed research within the traditional historical-interpretive work of the period specialties, or to expand these specialties through the study of neglected writers and non-literary texts.

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These new hiring priorities intensified the sense of discontinuity with the discipline's past, which was now seen as including both criticism from earlier in the century and the more recent wave of high theory. The preceding generation's relative lack of authority was a factor here, since it produced few master theorists to replace the old or to check the increasing tendency among scholars to mix or draw selectively from a variety of not wholly compatible theories. This lack also made the canon debates seem like an intergenerational conflict once removed, with young scholars standing up not to their immediate predecessors but the senior professoriate still in office. The debates were more complicated than this and had in fact begun some time before they erupted into the culture wars of the early '90s. But that these wars happened at all and were marked by well-publicized interventions by commentators from outside the discipline was symptomatic of a loss of cohesion within literary studies, in that the profession was no longer able to enforce jurisdiction over who could profess to know what was good for it.

This loss may be characterized as a decay of autopoietic autonomy, a phrase Luhmann uses to describe the power of any social system, such as the legal or art world, to set its own protocols and mode of discourse, to dictate how it describes itself and the subjects within its purview, and to maintain a dynamic stability whereby it can at once reproduce and revitalize itself.² The biggest threat to a system's autonomy is internal instability caused by material change: the academic job drought, as I've been suggesting, sparked division within literary studies because it impeded the discipline from reproducing itself according to a normal generational cycle.³ This instability was severe enough, moreover, that the discipline's professional boundaries appeared to grow porous. The culture wars, beginning with the canon debates and extending to the battles over postmodernism, were a highly politicized fracas over policies like affirmative action but they were also at some level contests over expertise. At the time it seemed like a lot of people on the outside felt entitled to have their say about what English departments ought to be doing. Journalists

2 Luhmann, I should point out, insists that there can be no "relative states" of autonomy but he does allow that a system's boundaries may be "subject to variation" (157).

3 The drought affected most academic programs and not just English departments. But the latter were more susceptible to the drought's destabilizing effects because of their relative weakness: methodological protocols in the humanities have always been less routinized than those of other disciplines, and literary studies have more recently been labouring under what John Guillory has described as a decline in their "market value" (*Cultural Capital* 46).

enrolled in survey courses to investigate how well the great books were being treated. Conservative politicians and critics charged the academic Left with dereliction of duty. Some scientists even professed themselves as competent to teach the classics as their colleagues in humanities departments (Gross and Levitt 243).

What these outsiders were chiefly reacting to were extreme statements of repudiation that many on the inside were voicing in support of changes within the discipline. New ideas were heralded as constituting a “radical break” with past practices and received certitudes, revisions to the curriculum were accompanied by denunciations of the very notion of a canon, and the value of any critique was correlated to the degree of its opposition to disciplinarity, essentialist thinking, or Western hegemony. These polemics were over the top and outsiders responded to them in dismay and in kind. I’m not suggesting that the changes weren’t necessary or welcome, that they would have occurred without the polemics, or that we English profs are to blame for inviting a conservative backlash. I’m only making the historical claim that the culture wars might have been less heated had the job drought and the subsequent shift in hiring priorities not made for a rough transition between scholarly generations.

After all, many of the poststructuralist tenets which were alternately upheld and vilified during the conflicts—arguments about the unsettledness of meaning, the motility of identity, the contingency of value—had been put forward by earlier master theorists yet nothing like the culture wars could have conceivably occurred during high theory’s ascendancy in the early ’80s.⁴ These theorists faced comparatively little hostility perhaps because they wrote in a style that was incomprehensible to lay readers, were surrounded by a formidable charismatic aura, or austerely refused to engage a public sphere where their ideas could be widely scrutinized. Yet whatever the case, their expertise was never in question. Nor was the authority of the literary professoriate as a whole ever so openly challenged as it was during the peak of the quarrelling, even though there have long been radical and controversial scholars, not to mention a venerable tradition of literary critics who have produced works of broadly cultural and

4 Though internecine scandals like the McCabe and de Man affairs got some media play at the time, they hardly provoked the kind of publishing bonanza that followed upon the canon debates and the Sokal hoax. Theory’s ascendancy during the early ’80s, we should recall, was simultaneous with the dramatic shift to the political right in many Western democracies, whereas the later culture wars extended into the neo-liberal ’90s.

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social commentary. This challenge to our professionalism would not have been so fierce had the discipline been less internally divided.

Since then we have regained autonomy but discontinuity has persisted, as evidenced by how statements of repudiation have become the most common gestures by which scholars justify what they're doing. One of the more striking features of recent cultural studies is how little it acknowledges prior traditions of cultural criticism. Repression of this history, John Brenkman has argued, accounts for how cultural critics are so keen on disavowing the literary: "Because cultural studies fails to recognize that cultural and social criticism, including its own variety, are thoroughly a part of literary culture, it is at the moment menacingly contradictory in its attitude toward literary studies" (111). The rhetoric of disavowal is as old as disciplinarity itself: by projecting an illusory coherence on "literary studies" from which it then imagines itself excluded, cultural studies can arrogate to itself a unity and definition that it otherwise lacks. Yet it seems there now exist few ways of positing this unity other than gestures of disavowal. Political criticism is seen to consist in repudiation, resistance and negation, as these are practiced through a hermeneutics of suspicion, a contestation of Western theory, an interrogation of grand narratives, or a movement beyond the literary. The motives and merits of this criticism are no longer in question, just as the polemics supporting it are less hyperbolic than they were during the wars. But the gestures used to define new critical activity are largely unchanged; some, notably the use of the "post-" prefix, are now clichés. Out of a principled or perhaps troubled sense of their own conflicted identity, it seems, literary and cultural critics have continued to avoid self-legitimizing gestures that imply a positive sense of the discipline.⁵

Many have acknowledged this absence of a positive basis for the work we do, but there's no consensus on how to address it. Normative ideals are regularly tendered as possible new grounds for literary studies: so

5 At the risk of sounding ungrateful to *ESC*'s new editors who invited me to contribute to this forum, I must admit that I was taken aback by the questions they asked contributors to consider, including "Does the literary need to be left behind in order for a left agenda to emerge properly in the academy? Has English studies passed beyond its encounter with literature...?" The questions are legitimate and worth addressing. What troubles me, rather, is that they are almost identical to questions that appear in the editors' preface to the volume (*What's Left of Theory?*) that inspired this forum, with one crucial difference: the word "literature" and its cognate "literary" have been substituted for the word "theory" in the original. Does it matter anymore, I wonder, what we are leaving behind so long as we are seen to be leaving it behind?

far, we've gotten predictions of the impending "return" of beauty, wonder, form, ethics, Enlightenment universals, and literature itself, among others. That these ideals, however worthy, seem like spirits anxiously conjured up from the past may explain why none has been widely acclaimed. Other critics have argued for changes of a more professional nature, including a "systemic commitment" to the "seriousness of teaching" (Levine 17), the development of "convincing rationales" for maintaining "disciplinary heterogeneity" (Bérubé 107), a renewed emphasis upon the "social value of the specific kinds of knowledge we produce" (Guillory "Name" 541), a reimplementaion of the "public rigor" of philosophical metanarratives within humanities research (Miyoshi 49), or, more simply, greater respect for "specific disciplinary skills" (Žižek 29). These proposals sound good but they are all a tad willful, since it's not clear if the disciplinary unity they are meant to inspire is possible or even widely desired. Besides, none of these proposed changes seems designed to remedy the conditions that originally gave rise to the discontinuity.

As these conditions have not much improved, the discipline remains riven, even if the nature of this division has changed. The replacement of many permanent with sessional positions has led to an unprecedented hierarchization of labour within humanities departments. Most of those who are hired for sessional positions are expected to teach first-year composition classes or introductions to literature and cultural studies; that they are joined in this capacity by few of their tenured colleagues has made these courses seem increasingly marginal to the curriculum, despite the commitment of those who teach them and despite the best efforts of departments to keep their introductory offerings up to date. Meanwhile, period divisions appear to have hardened, less because of specialization *per se*—interdisciplinary scholarship is prized in all fields—than because of atomization brought on by the combined effect of fewer specialists being spread across more fields and changing expectations about the work being done within fields. Those in less-populated specialties like medieval or 18th-century can no longer count on there being many fellow enthusiasts in attendance at general literary conferences like the annual ACCUTE meeting, and so they instead seek out their brethren at multidisciplinary period conferences. This has reduced the opportunities for exchange and cross-fertilization between literary fields; to some extent this atomization has made for divergences in methodology and critical emphasis across the specialties. At the same time, the push toward interdisciplinarity, canon expansion and detailed contextualization has increased the range of work being done within specialties and thus the amount of knowledge

that specialists are expected to possess, thereby encouraging further atomization.

This last change is one of several that benefit the advancement of knowledge at the cost of normalizing division. The rise of cultural studies, interdisciplinary programs, and so-called identity studies (gender studies, Native Canadian studies, subaltern studies, etc.) has reinvigorated the humanities, broadened their engagement with a diverse world, and increased the range of offerings available to students—and most of these programs are relatively inexpensive to mount, since they typically share faculty and courses with existing programs. There is good reason to be sanguine about their development and the pluralism they foster; their proliferation may represent a new form of the flexibility that has often been seen as a hallmark of literary studies. Yet this flexibility is equally being circumscribed insofar as these new offerings are being set up as separate programs or “studies.” The rationale for separation is not readily apparent: the legitimacy of these programs is not in question, as it might have been three decades ago, and there doesn’t seem to be any external pressure on their proponents to stake out turf. But the feeling seems to be that the only way to promote and define them is by differentiating them from what already exists. Some differentiation, from other departments or faculties, is in order. Yet, while differentiation may provide disciplinary definition, it cannot enable a discipline to reproduce itself. It can lead only to more differentiation.⁶

In asking what’s left of English studies, we are, I suppose, sensing the possibility that it may soon be left behind, that it can no longer reproduce itself in changing contexts. Left scholars, it’s true, are feeling pressed to abandon high for mass culture, since nowadays mass culture is where the ideological action is. There is an old reply to those feeling such pressure: you can’t reflect on something you’re engrossed in. Nonetheless, nagging doubts now exist that English cannot entirely supply the knowledge or tools necessary for exercising critical reflection on all features of contemporary life. This is a stark change from just a couple of decades ago, when master theorists were calling literary studies the queen of the disciplines because it was the only branch of knowledge that fully confronted the narrativity, contingency, and inevitable failure of any attempt at relating truth. Perhaps nostalgia for those confident days has kindled the current

6 Rey Chow suggests that political criticism’s reliance on the language of resistance and differentiation is a kind of poststructuralist hangover, in that critics remain beholden to deconstruction’s central thematic of “Permanent differentiation and permanent impermanence” (179).

doubts. But it's clear after more than a decade of turbulence and attrition that this confidence was excessive and could not withstand the effects of material change. All the lessons that English can teach, from critical theory to cultural knowledge to reading and writing, are as valuable and desirable as ever, but there are other lessons to be learned as well.

The doubts are understandable. Division has made it harder to describe what we all do or to relate this activity to a larger picture of the discipline. This difficulty has, in turn, put certain components of the curriculum under stress: core requirements, canonical surveys, and introductory courses have become burdensome to organize and staff because they are expected to answer so many needs and constituencies even as their legitimacy may no longer be taken for granted. But there is no reason to regret this loss of cohesion, as it has hardly impeded the normal functioning of English departments or our ability to make decisions about hiring and curriculum reform. The only loss we should be regretting is the waste of an entire generation's worth of talent and skill. We should not compound this loss by thinking we've moved beyond it.

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