



W. Jackson Bate

# THE CRISIS IN ENGLISH STUDIES

**A distinguished Harvard humanist charges that professors of the humanities, "through progressive stages of specialization," have squandered their Renaissance heritage. He sees scant hope for society unless new approaches to the humanities can address "the whole experience of life—historical movements and individual dilemmas in choice of values."**

The humanities are not merely entering, they are plunging into their worst state of crisis since the modern university was formed a century ago, in the 1880s. Before that time, most universities and colleges in the Atlantic World followed the curriculum developed in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a curriculum heavily literary and classical. Whatever it lacked, a unity of knowledge and learned concern was taken for granted in that curriculum. But by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the specialization of German universities, brilliant and much admired, was rapidly adopted by universities and colleges elsewhere, and even further fragmentized and regimented. In the United States, the first result was the founding of "departments" (broad at first but subdivided in the next generation, and progressively narrowed). Between 1880 and 1920 the humanities, now several departments, found themselves in the peculiar federation of states (and, very soon, counties and townships) that characterizes the modern university, held together less by loyalties to the institution and to broader ideals of education than by the desire to be left alone to "cultivate one's own garden."

After a century of the new university structure, the humanities are not only in the weakest state they ever suffered but seem bent on a self-destructive course, through a combination of anger, fear, and purblind defensiveness; the strongest help from enlightened

administration in universities and colleges is indispensable to prevent the suicide (or, at least, self-trivialization) that will result.

I shall concentrate on English departments, because I am better informed about them and because they are, for at least two reasons, the flagship of the humanistic fleet: sheer size in number of students and (though less large proportionately) of faculty. Moreover, during the first half of our century, English departments, for good or ill, took into receivership a variety of subjects that other departments, becoming concerned more with methodology, began to neglect. Thus, as philosophy departments began to focus more exclusively on mathematical or quasi-mathematical procedure, and offered fewer traditional courses in the history of philosophy, English moved into the breach and, until twenty or thirty years ago, a quarter to a third of any respectable department of English was concerned with intellectual history and the interrelation of literature and the history of ideas, however naïve many of its exponents were. Ethics, the theory and philosophy of art, religious history, even the study of cosmologies, became, by partial neglect from other fields, a responsibility for English departments (though admittedly not solely for them). As ignorance of other languages, ancient or modern, became more common, and as other departments in the humanities shrank defensively in size, even foreign literature in translation was often tossed over or left

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by neglect to English departments. As a result of these and other additional responsibilities, English departments became more crucial, while at the same time more diverse and also more vulnerable. Together with the built-in diversity of interest, the range of what English departments offered in these years (from 1900 to 1950, and especially from 1930 to 1950) made them central for students. If English departments falter badly, all humanistic departments will suffer; many problems are the same among them—"English" is a barometer and measure for other humanistic fields, although, admittedly, each field has special problems and hurdles to face.

**B**efore turning specifically to the crisis in "English studies" (by which we mean everything that English departments could, or should, do), we should at least get a sense of why English departments became what they did—with all their mixed aims, responsibilities, anxieties, failures, and challenges.

As I look at it, four major things, radically different in kind, went into the making of English departments from the 1880s through the 1950s.

The first arises from two built-in problems, both of which result from dealing with the language we all use:

*The potential breadth of subject.* Theoretically (not actually, of course) almost everything written in the language, on whatever subject, could come under its consideration—history, politics, moral thought, philosophy and cosmology, Mother Goose rhymes, economics and sociology—literature potentially being the written record of human experience. Hence people in every field of learning or interest, rightly and justifiably, feel concern and at liberty to have a say about the pursuit and teaching of English studies.

*The unrivaled openness, the easy accessibility, of the "idiom"*—the form of expression—which is simply the language we all use. This radically contrasts with almost every other field in higher education: with not merely the natural sciences (where a threshold of mathematical preparation and specific methodologies is taken for granted at the start) but with the more systematic social sciences, and, in the humanities, with the foreign languages, where you at least have to know the language before you concentrate in it, or with music, where you at least have to be able to read musical notation. In other words, English studies have no special vocabulary. (Of course, there are critics and interpreters of literature during the last twenty years who, like many sociologists, have tried to give themselves elite status by constructing a special, allusive [and elusive] vocabulary, but this runs counter to the healthful, anti-jargonistic stance of literary studies at their best, from ancient Greece to the present.) Yes, only in English is it assumed that all you have to do is be able to speak and write in order to discuss what the subject should do. If this has advantages (which indeed it does), it can also leave the field more nakedly vulnerable if only because administrations—facing the lack of wide agreement on a narrowly prescribed procedure and method in the field—are at a loss, in appointments, to discover just who should help them to evaluate either promise or achievement. You can quickly demonstrate that a book in the sciences is silly

or inadequate. But to show why a work on Elizabethan or Romantic literature is good or poor is very difficult without writing something equally long, going over it point by point, and then writing something that will redo it completely in order to prove the points.

**I** turn now to a second factor that shaped English departments, the great Renaissance concept of *litterae humaniores*, "humane letters" as the central educational experience: in short, the Renaissance concept of the "humanities." This factor, in contrast with the first, is an inheritance, and a large one, rather than a situation. Yet the Renaissance ideal takes for granted and welcomes both breadth of subject and accessibility, despite the hurdles and vulnerability that these bring—welcomes them as its glory and challenge, as its strengthening purpose and direction.

A history of this Renaissance ideal of humane letters would comprise the central chapter in the history of liberal education from the Renaissance to the later nineteenth century. If we put it in a few sentences, we could describe its beginning as an attempt to take the experience of the classical world (ancient Greece and Rome from about 900 B.C. to 400 A.D.) and—putting it in larger historical perspective, and intermeshing literature, history, and philosophy—build from it (with the potentialities and structure of the medieval and Renaissance university in mind), and do so with the hope of forming that mysterious, all-important thing called character as well as the generally educated mind.

Taken for granted in the ideal of *litterae humaniores* is the traditional premise that art, at its best, is (in



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Aristotle's word) an "imitation" of reality (nature), bearing in mind that reality has many aspects, some deeper than others. The essential point is that the arts begin to rise in value, they transcend the merely decorative, as they become a form of knowing.

To the above was joined the Renaissance reaffirmation of another classical ideal: a trust in the moral and educative effect on human character of knowledge, as the act of knowing penetrates to the confused emotion and the slippery imagination of the human psyche.



I think here of Coleridge's fine restatement of this ideal: "The heart should have fed upon the truth, as insects on a leaf, till it be tinged with the color, and shows its food in every minutest fiber." With such an aim, the Renaissance ideal of *humanitas* involves not only literature and the arts but all studies that deal with what is specifically *human* in man's activities including, most obviously, philosophy, anthropology, and theology—history, too, which in turn subsumes such subjects as the history of science.

This Renaissance concept of humane letters, from and with the help of the classical, especially Greek, inheritance, is one of the most remarkable ideas in the history of education. The product—the body of ideals in humane letters—carried Europe through the Renaissance with brilliant creativity, and, in the process, also produced the Enlightenment (from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century), off the capital of which we continue to live. This is a very good record.

But as we isolate and put our finger on the state of English studies from the 1880s through the 1950s, two further things wrestled with those we have summarized—wrestled (to use Coleridge's phrase) in a "war-embrace,"—and managed, most of the time, to maintain a half-nelson grip. They are at present close to attaining a full-nelson grip. I cite them below as the third and fourth elements in the "chemistry" of English studies.

One is the new and restrictive (surprisingly restrictive, when you think of the centuries preceding) background of Romantic and nineteenth-century taste. The movement loosely called Romanticism produced many important and valuable results, but in its late, extreme form (by the 1880s and 1890s, when departments were founded), its emphases on the purely personal and idiosyncratic helped to cut off approaches in the arts to large public issues and values; and the result was a strong leaning toward aestheticism—which means, in effect, that interest focuses less on literature and the arts as a total interplay of mind and experience than on the special *medium*—the texture, the tonal qualities, the image-patterns, the semantic associations: in short, the formal qualities. This tendency is necessary up to a point. But it can become exclusive and thin itself out in the process. Carried far enough, it can lead to an ignorant bias against all kinds of writing other than what Aristotle calls the "mimetic forms" (poetry, prose fiction, and drama) and a neglect of great intellectual prose—history, oratory, philosophy.

A final element, still more restrictive, is a phenom-

enon we wrestle with in every field of learning: organized (in fact, militantly organized) academic specialism, which gathered force in the 1880s and 1890s, and has increased exponentially since then.

Serving as prototype were the natural sciences where one can often build directly and logically on the bricks laid by predecessors. Here the brilliant successes of specialization were obvious: Hence we often describe them as the "accumulative" sciences. Inevitably, the traditional liberal arts felt that they too could keep pace—could retain respectability and the grace of the administration—if they followed the prototype of the accumulative sciences.

The human being, as Aristotle said, is an "imitative animal." Most of what we do and say consists of imitation of some sort. (This it is that necessitates the length of human development, compared with that of other animals—the extended childhood and adolescence.) But one of the sadder commonplaces about human nature is the incorrigible tendency (when we face a high enough achievement or something different enough from our individual experience) to imitate the wrong things—or at least the peripheral rather than the essential things. My pet example is the conduct of the captains serving under Alexander the Great, one of whose shoulders, higher than the other, forced him to carry his head slightly to one side. In imitation of Alexander, his captains, walking among their troops, carried their heads that way too. What is called "decay" in movements in the arts (since we began to make an idolatry of the idea of "originality" in the later eighteenth century) is often said to be "imitation." This is silly. The secret of decay in the arts comes not from imitation (in fact, decadence appears just as much in the stock refusal to follow what went before) but from an imitation of the wrong, unessential things, the exterior mannerisms.

Of course, for all achievement gained through specialization a price is paid. As Francis Bacon long ago prophesied in his manifesto, *The Advancement of Learning*: When knowledge gets systematized into separable branches and approaches, it may be further polished but will not grow in stature. No significant insight can be attained if you stand on the flat "level of the same science." In the strong initial period of specialization of a true science, a limitation is accepted as a price, not as itself a gain—a price paid in order to make strides toward the general end in mind. In this creative stage, the limitation is far from being desired as an end in itself, but the temptation in human nature is to imitate the limitation—to view the means as ends themselves—and to leave any further ends to luck and serendipity.



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As the teaching of the humanities changed in colleges and universities from the 1880s to the 1930s, the easiest thing to imitate, in the procedure of the natural sciences, was not the *openness* of science—its integrity and generality of vision—but one aspect of its procedure, as myopically seen and interpreted by the outsider: that is, its self-imposed limitations through *specialization*. Thus, in literature, you confine your area, to begin with, to one author, a group of authors, or one aspect or genre of a period of a half century. And you ask only certain kinds of questions—those you have been hearing about or those most capable of systematization, leaving aside the larger difficulties and uncertainties of the subject.

The whole procedure was immensely seductive. To begin with, you could justify it on what seemed high intellectual (more exactly, routinely academic) grounds. Were you not showing literary studies to be as good as this new, burly academic child, the sciences, and doing so in the same ways? Here were “rigor,” “logic,” and “integrity to fact.” Recalling William James’s puckish division between the tender- and tough-minded pursuits, could we not retort that we, too, were tough? And, in dealing with administrations which were just catching up on the Romantic ideal of “originality” (whether for good or bad), were we not, through this specialization, turning up the “new,” hence, the original? A new date for a minor author at first, and a half century later, a wholesale reshuffling of values—a reshuffling downward, which is always easier than a reshuffling upward—down from the classical ideal of the central importance of literature to a self-imposed modesty and skepticism about its centrality. At the same time the procedure was seductive because it appealed simultaneously to two feelings treacherously important to the human psyche: the yearning for importance and the craving for safety. Within a restricted area, you could, with modest talents and some work over the years, become “important”—your expert opinion would be consulted; and you would also be “safe”—an extra fifteen or twenty years would really establish you in the specialty, free from large, embarrassing questions. Through the chopping up of subareas, a growing premium was laid on having something new or, more exactly, *different* to say—or simply finding something with which to take issue, and in small enough units to be manageable. Hence arose the obsessive concern with publication. The greater humanists decried this; and though lesser figures (having often published a fraction as much) were more rigorous in supporting the publish-or-perish syndrome, the major humanists might have won the day—at least have prevented the worst abuses—except that administrations throughout the academic world (thoroughly indoctrinated by the 1940s and 1950s with clichés about productivity, and habituated to specialization in the sciences) sided with the militant “middle” of the profession of literature and the humanities. The irony is that, at bottom, they became less concerned about great teaching than about “visibility” (what will the neighbors ever think?). Few administrations, forced to decide about this highly confined visibility, failed to equate it with prestige, nor could major humanists get far by reminding administrations that *prestige* comes from the word (as in *prestidigitator*) that means “illusion.”

The new ersatz specialism in the humanities quickly narrowed, and first focused on three things in *litterae humaniores*, which older graduates of Harvard will recall. (1) The Renaissance had sought to recover exact texts of classical writers; so this was applied to every modern writer. Entire careers were established on investigations that involved changing punctuation and an occasional word in a relatively recent text. (2) A kind of literary-scientific genetics developed—a study of sources for every possible gimmick, theme, or allusion. (3) Above all, philology—the study of words historically—achieved a stranglehold on English studies from the 1880s to the 1940s. If you took a Ph.D. here in English as late as the 1930s, you were suddenly shoved—with grammars written in German—into An-

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glo-Saxon and Middle Scots, *plus* Old Norse (Icelandic), Gothic, Old French, and so on. I used to sympathize with the Japanese and Chinese students who had come here to study literature, struggling with a German grammar to translate Gothic into English! William Allan Neilson, the famous president of Smith College, had been a professor of English here for years. Forgivably, he stated that the Egyptians took only five weeks to make a mummy, but the Harvard English Department took five years. If other universities required less, it was not because they were broader-minded but simply easier. Moreover, the Harvard department had its own antibodies that were, in time, to correct the situation.

Meanwhile, for the profession at large, World War II proved a watershed in the emphasis on the particular kinds of specialism we have mentioned. Very quickly, as such things go, a new specialism had toppled the old emphasis on philology, sources, and the rest. In fact, by 1960 or so, two-thirds of the profession had, for the time being, junked the old specialization (historical periodism carried to a minute degree; narrow biographism; and philology). The “New Criticism” swept the nation’s universities in the 1950s and 1960s. My revered friend I. A. Richards was the benign godfather, if not the actual father. The impelling motive was—as his followers construed it—to sweep the board clean of the huge accumulated learning of the past (biographical, historical, or otherwise) which was leading the subject to suffocate under its own rubbish. Instead the ideal was to concentrate, with naked eye, on the text of a poem. (By implication, this was soon extended, in a way Richards never quite intended, to dramas and novels.)

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With the advent of the "New Criticism," specialism deepened. Experiment in the medium—words, phrases, imagery patterns, tonal patterns—usurped all that could be subsumed by the phrase, "content as transmuted into expression." Goethe had long ago prophesied this, saying that in time we'd stop asking how valuable a thing is: We shall soon ask only "How well is it done?" but not ask the essential question, "Was it worth doing in the first place?"

medium (words, phrases, imagery patterns, tonal patterns) usurped—no other word will do—all that could be subsumed by the phrase, "content as transmuted into expression." Goethe had long ago prophesied this, saying that in time we'd stop asking how valuable a thing is: We shall soon ask only "How well is it done?" but not ask the essential question, "Was it worth doing in the first place?"

In the first years after World War II, the strains created by the various specialisms were worrying far-sighted humanists. But temporarily—say, from 1947 until about 1960—the centrifugal heterogeneity was kept in a precarious balance. Though actively practiced by only one in twenty, the Renaissance ideal of *litterae humaniores* was at least given lip service. Even militant specialists half sensed that it was the only umbrella under which their subjects could unite. And it still allowed the academic "humanist" to feel that his or her subject was of central importance to life. Philology remained, not with its older stranglehold, but as a legitimate and valuable part of the subject. The New Criticism, despite its (potential) antihistorical bias, was proving healthful in getting students to concentrate on the text. The "history of ideas" retained some impressive scholars who could serve as role models to younger ones.

But then two sociological phenomena contributed to a radical change, especially after 1955. The first was the enormous expansion of colleges and universities after World War II, and the need for teachers leapt to unique proportions. At Harvard we tripled our Ph.D.'s. But major state universities, which till 1955 each produced five Ph.D.'s in English per year, were, within another ten years, producing seventy or eighty! What quicker way to "train" them—get them into the profession—than to junk, quickly, all but the rudiments of the New Criticism (people concentrating on a text or two, and pushing aside everything else)? For twenty years (though there are notable exceptions), the profession engorged a huge group—mostly all tenured by now—who regarded literature as a private preserve, and were themselves innocent of history, of philology, of "ideas" generally. (To Harvard's eternal credit, it should be said that we still required more than this. But the growing state universities, jumping from five to eighty Ph.D.'s, could not and did not.) Nor were those who reacted against them doing so in the spirit of Renaissance *litterae humaniores*. They simply dug

further into their specialties (usually one author, and often one aspect of a minor author). The profession became polarized between the two groups just described. But there was no open warfare between them any more. The cake (in jobs, grants, "time off" for publication) was so large that everyone's slice of it seemed to satisfy for a while.

Yet Nature abhors a vacuum, and intellectually the vacuum, long in preparation, had become almost complete. The cruel truth is that far too much of the profession now had one thing in common: They appeared to be sublimely unaware of the legacy of thought and the inheritance of idealism that had so long given literature its massive centrality and human relevance. Even if the second sociological phenomenon, which I shall mention in a moment, had not occurred, something would soon move into that vacuum. There would have been a desire to find *some* theoretical basis, however naïve, if only to keep up professional self-respect. One of the worst results as well as symptoms was the virtual dropping, by English departments, of central courses in the history of criticism and literary theory from the ancient Greeks to the present. Those who do not know history, said Santayana, are condemned to repeat it. Scarcely one approach to the arts has been advanced during the last twenty years that—in its essential premises—has not been examined and answered (often profoundly) in the previous two thousand years.

And yet, ironically, as we reached this nadir in true sophistication, there sprang up a great hunger for the "theory" of literature and art. One is reminded of Milton's lines in "Lycidas":

The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,  
But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw,  
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread.

At this very moment the second of the sociological phenomena mentioned above occurred. To describe it would be to recapitulate what everyone knows: The bottom fell out of the academic job-market with a speed and a completeness never before experienced, even in the Great Depression. We all know the reasons: the vast overproduction of Ph.D.'s for twenty years, most of whom were by now tenured; the draconian effects of inflation; public disillusionment with widespread higher education as the key to a new society. No academic field was spared, but hardest hit were the humanities. Perhaps two out of ten Ph.D.'s in English and analogous fields secured a job that would have been acceptable in the 1950s. The gravity of the situation increases with each year and shows no chance



of improvement before the end of the century. Moreover, the number of undergraduates concentrating in the liberal arts, including English, plummeted in most colleges. (Harvard is an exception, at least until now.)

In facing the shock of this, the profession of English studies, and of literary studies generally, has sought for ten years to justify itself in order to recover its centrality. With the legacy of *litterae humaniores* almost forgotten, except among a tiny fraction of its members, the profession tried to do two things that would induce both hard-pressed administrations and bewildered students to grasp at it in preference to other subjects. The two efforts were strangely contradictory, even divisive.

First, the profession sought horizontal spread by pouring more batter on the griddle, so to speak. A common denominator in the scores of "new courses" is that the traditional allies, history and philosophy, were avoided as unnecessary demands that interfered with the popularity so eagerly desired. Subjects that seemed to fit into current enthusiasms were torn from context and treated in isolation. Women writers who had worked, with pride, in larger literary traditions, were snatched arbitrarily—whether major or minor—and a field overnight was created in "women's studies." The militant exclusiveness in focus of ethnic literatures is too well known to need comment, as is the sadness that excellent literature, among all minorities, should be treated in the isolation that liberal-minded people deplore. "Gay" studies were presented in courses. "Business English" courses (business schools have money; you can try for a job there teaching How to Write a Letter) exfoliated. Courses in film that demanded little more than passive receptivity, the memory of miscellaneous titles, and facility with journalistic jargon spawned.

While expanding the curriculum in so undemanding a way, hoping administrations would see that the new courses at least brought in students, there was still uneasiness. Other fields could laugh at them—economics, the natural sciences. All but the most stupid could see that English studies lacked any intellectual "core." What to do? Predecessors had told the younger scholars of the old tyranny of philology from 1890 to 1940. This was out of the question now. They heard that rebels in the 1920s and 1930s had gone in for the history

of ideas. But what would that mean?—plowing through Aristotle, Spinoza, Hume, and Kant? As impossible to ask of the teacher now as of the student. So, too, with all that intellectual prose—Bacon, Swift, Johnson, Burke, Coleridge, Mill, and so on. In any case, hadn't New Criticism shown that all this prose wasn't truly "literary"? No plot, no *mythos*, no fictive invention shown in structure?

Yet the conscience gnawed. And the past twenty years have seen the flowering of a few, a very few, substitutes in "intellectual core" and "rigor." The most promising (though still limited) were the variety of things subsumed by the word "structuralism," with which, by 1980, many teachers of English were strongly impressed. It had started as a new approach to linguistics. As contrasted with the historical character of traditional philology (family connection of languages—for example, how Germanic developed from Indo-European, into Gothic, Old High German, Anglo-Saxon, and the like), structural linguistics looked for common properties in *any* language, however unrelated historically—Persian, Peruvian, Chinese, Navaho, and so on. This search for the essential building blocks out of which language is made was quickly extended to the study of primitive myth, above all in the brilliant work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Elementary examples would be symmetries or pairs of opposites (sky-earth, left-right, up-down) and objects associated (e.g., "up"—sun, eagle, or cloud). In narrative literature, most obviously in the simpler sorts, you also find basic components used as themes: the hero of folk tale who does not know who his parents are; the benevolent aunt, uncle, or older friend (Aunt Betsey in *David Copperfield*). The approach, needless to say, can reach very sophisticated levels, and the theoretical appeal was strong. It was a welcome antidote to empirical studies. It preferred "system" to fact gathering, and had the attraction that all methodology has in appearing to simplify the chaos of data. The age-old problem of the relation of the mind to the universe was given a new turn. Finally, the pioneers of structuralism (justifiably) appeared learned, as they roamed from Peruvian myth to Siberian folk tales and Icelandic sagas.

But though I am a kind of structuralist at heart, in sympathy, I must confess that there were built-in problems. After the pioneers, the anthropological and folkloristic data were exhausted unless you (an English teacher) were even more learned in the esoteric. Otherwise, you could only repeat. A second problem: The complexity and diversity of sophisticated societies—which literature rightly should reflect and try to interpret—were more elusive than any system could hope to pursue without stretching categories until they became meaningless. A third problem: Once you had done all the classification, and found these building blocks, so what? Where do you go from there? What's good, what's bad, what's middling? The procedure—however commendable in its search for the essential and its desire to clear the board—has helped, very much, to increase the tendency of the humanities to cut themselves off into a special corner. True, the followers in the structuralist train might flirt with linguistics and anthropology, but they were fundamentally historically innocent, and (because philosophy from the beginning to Kant, and even after Kant, was

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a nearly closed book to them) many were philosophically naïve. In other words, the approach, whatever its advantages, strengthened the most serious liability that literary study had been gradually creating for itself: the autonomous nature of literature (and the arts) as a separate preserve, apart from the common experiences of life. Hazlitt had a point when he said that the arts resembled Antaeus in the fable, who was invincible as long as his feet touched his mother Earth, but who was easily strangled by Hercules once he was lifted from the strength-giving ground.

The last limitation is carried to a further extreme by the strange stepchild of structuralism known as "deconstructionism," which, in this country if not in England, has acquired considerable publicity. Active exponents are still relatively few. But at least a quarter of the profession acts as though it were intimidated by it; and that intimidation is a symptom both of the philosophical naïveté of the profession, and, far more seriously, of its automatic assumption—in its search for leaders and thinkers—that it is perfectly all right (in fact, shows "scientific" and "philosophical" rigor) to isolate literature still more into a self-sealed and autonomous entity, into which few students, few of the general public, indeed few—if any—writers of the past two thousand years could be able to enter or could wish to enter.

Deconstructionism—whose presiding spirit has been the puckish Parisian, Jacques Derrida—unites structuralist concerns for very special kinds of pattern with what comes down to a nihilistic view of literature, of human communication, and of life itself. The building blocks of an author—say, Shakespeare—are reduced to a sequence of signs (words), the "meaning" of which has no real relationship to the author's own intention or imaginative vision or to the world in general. *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* are not about aspects of human experience as interpreted by Shakespeare. They are a structure of linguistic conventions; and the interpretation is open to anyone (anyone at all?)—exponents never seem to draw the line firmly) who "deconstructs" the text, sweeps the ground clear, and then creates, through criticism, another (and presumably more valid) work of art: this procedure is gloriously free of any necessary relationship to history, to philosophy, or to human lives (apart from that of the "destructor"). Derrida significantly never turns to the really major philosophers except to snatch at stale pessimisms (e.g., Nietzsche), which appear to deny the possibility of finding truth. Those schooled in the history of philosophy see this skepticism as old hat. Why not go back to the pre-Socratics in Greece who argued thus and to whom the bulk of the Platonic dialogues

are a powerful answer? Or, skipping over two thousand years to the eighteenth century, why not turn to David Hume, the greatest skeptic in the history of thought (who would doubtless consider the deconstructionists' premises and certainly their conclusions to be of kindergarten nature) and then turn to Kant, by whom so much of this is answered? The truth is that, with the fading of the Renaissance ideal through progressive stages of specialism, leading to intellectual emptiness, we are left with a potentially suicidal movement among "leaders of the profession," while, at the same time, the profession sprawls, without its old center, in helpless disarray.

One quickly cited example is the professional organization, the Modern Language Association, which was established about a century ago (with 39 professors of English among its founders) and has now a membership of more than 25,000. Fifteen years ago it was already considered too cumbersome and specialized: topics for "papers" had by then been narrowed in each literature (mainly English) to half-century units (English Literature 1660-1700, etc.) or, occasionally, by subdivisions of genres. Yet, in the reform so necessary, was the procedure simplified into broader categories of larger meaning? A glance at its thick program for its last meeting shows a massive increase and fragmentation into more than 500 categories! I cite a few examples: "Deconstruction as Politics," "Lesbian Feminist Poetry in Texas," "The Trickster Figure in Chicano and Black Literature," or (astonishingly) "The Absent Father in Fact, Metaphor, and Metaphysics in the Middle Generation of American Poets." These, mind you, are not specialized papers but topical headings of groups, within which the still more specialized papers were to be given. Naturally, the progressive trivialization of topics has made these meetings a laughingstock in the national press.

Our concern here is with the crisis in English studies and not with the answer. Any specific answer is bound to be mechanical, and to mean little: e.g., no student should be admitted for graduate studies in English who has not taken two (or three?) courses in history, and two courses in the history of philosophy. And we can hardly say: "The trouble with you people—15,000 college teachers of English—is that you don't know what it was all about in the first place: Here, in three pages, is a program for the Renaissance ideal. . . . Go off and re-educate and re-educate yourselves."

My appeal is to administrations of universities and colleges, and also to alumni and educated people gen-

Hazlitt had a point when he said that the arts resembled Antaeus in the fable, who was invincible as long as his feet touched his mother Earth, but who was easily strangled . . . once he was lifted from the strength-giving ground.





erally. It is often said that war is too important to leave to the generals—the “experts.” So with the whole cultural heritage—the written record of human experience—that we call literature; it belongs to all of us.

I couch this appeal in general terms, yet terms that are fairly specific when the cards are down and a tenure appointment is to be made, as it must be, every week throughout major universities in this country. I put it in a series of maxims:

— The aim and tradition of literature is to give, if possible, the *whole* experience of life—historical movements and also the individual’s dilemmas in choice of values. If the humanist believes that he can say nothing about this, it is a frightening situation for the human race. Where else can the student turn? And a somber question arises, to which university administrations must address themselves: Can human society bear such a negative answer from the one field now that might—if it is open enough—help us to find our way? If there is surrender from within that field, what hope is left?

— The humanities are “always in crisis,” as Douglas Bush has written,\* because they must, perforce, deal with original sin as well as with the highest hopes and visions of mankind. You are dealing, in short, with something as varied as human life and human experience. Hence do not despair because the humanities are not built from and through a special framework like the accumulative sciences, where step-by-step agreement is possible. You are dealing with human nature, in all its diversity, with the envies and smallness as well as its capacities for vision and for that wonderful quality, commonsense, the essence of which is to be able to keep in mind several things at once.

— It follows that the humanities, in order to be what we need of them, must be *frankly eclectic*—as is our approach to life itself. To administrations like Harvard’s, which make appointments, and to departments elsewhere that are almost autonomous in appointments, I wish to repeat the obvious: Most intelligent people do occasionally ask what life is all about. Of course, this can be overdone, and we end in paralysis. Yet if English studies say that these questions are not only unanswerable but not even worth asking, they are flying the white flag of surrender.

— To administrations especially: The great writers have been great interpreters of life, and have expressed it in a rich variety of ways. The teacher with only one way, one method, of looking at it, is *not* the answer. That professor is leaving it to the untutored student to try to find the answers, and to try to put it all together into meaning (an intolerable burden on students of college age). Literary studies never have one single literary center and premise. If such a closed “system” is forced upon students, it will distort and cut off a great deal of experience that is necessary. What great teacher of the humanities can be cited who did not combine and subsume a variety of methods and ap-

\* “The Humanities,” *Engaged and Disengaged* (1966), p. 131.

proaches as we ourselves must do, each of us, in this strange journey through life? Therefore, seek “pluralism,” not in a diverse and warring department (though this is better than nothing) but in individual appointments generally. This is no rebuke to specialism in its older sense. It is only to say that, in addition to special expertise, we must also look for range in and through the humanity that expresses itself in what we still call the humanities, which are rightly put in the plural. Unity will be provided if we seek only to present, in honesty, great expressive spirits and great expressive epochs of human experience.

The subject matter—the world’s great literature—is unrivaled. All we need is the chance and the imagination to help it work upon the minds and characters of the millions of students to whom we are responsible. Ask that the people you are now breeding up in departments, and to whom you now give tenure appointments, be capable of this. The number at first may

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seem small. But much can be done if one has a really committed and talented nucleus. The very grimness of the job situation has for some years been gradually shaking out of graduate study many who had formerly drifted into it. Small as it is, a larger fraction of it than I can remember consists of gifted young people who really *care*, who are ready to face difficulties and to make sacrifices in order to recapture some understanding of the centrality and larger values of humane letters. At Harvard we have been trying to take advantage of this. For example, we have seen to it, the last six or seven years, that *every* graduate student combines, in the first year, the study of the history of criticism and the philosophy of literature with the study and practice of college teaching. As never before, throughout the graduate program, we are emphasizing the importance of range and flexibility of mind and are attempting to instill antibodies against pressures or fads that can lead to trivialization. The best that emerge from this are indeed superlative. The situation is by no means hopeless. But we shall need the help of the administration, in the years ahead, in appointing to the staff models not of trivially specialized expertise, but of a combination of some creative specialism (inevitable in the modern world) with the range and general power of both character and mind that we have been trying to form and develop. With this help we can once again encourage the profession, more actively than we do even now, in the next generation. □