

BIGGER THAN A DISCIPLINE?

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I hesitate to call it “composition,” and I’m dissatisfied with “rhetoric” as well, which has never really managed to free itself from the ponderousness of The Classics. But whatever we eventually call it, a field dedicated to the teaching and study of writing might enjoy brighter prospects now than at any time since the 1950s, when growing access to higher education made English 101 a standard feature of the undergraduate curriculum. For one thing, our society needs it. Many of my married friends have children who read less than those friends did when they were young—before computers, DVDs, CDs, and so on. And for the most part, their children not only read less, they write less comfortably and less ably as well. We need something like “comp” for other reasons, too. At the same time that the printed word has lost its former preeminence, what we refer to as “reading” and “writing” have never been more varied or more complex. Compare Jacques Derrida’s encyclopedic oeuvre, which quite possibly nobody except Derrida can explain, to Northrop Frye’s more modest achievement, the clear outlines of which an undergraduate could master in several diligent afternoons. Or compare Clifford Geertz’s *Local Knowledge* with Margaret Mead’s *Sex and Temperament*, published fifty years earlier. Or William James’s accounts of pragmatism to the brain-busting difficulty of our “possible worlds” philosophers. Remember also that only a century ago, there were simply no such disciplines as microbiology or computer science or genetic engineering—no journals in those fields and no genres to go with them. And if these strange new ways of writing now proliferate like orchids in the tropics, they are not only more complex than anything before but also more divergent from each other than philosophy was from politics in the age of Aristotle or natural science from law in John Locke’s time.

In place of “composition” or “rhetoric,” the term that I would like to use—knowledge-ology—no one else could ever be expected to adopt, and I can hardly blame them. But my point is that something is happening to knowledge, which few of us pay much attention to, absorbed as we

are individually by our own little specializations. Even prophets of the “information age” have largely overlooked the most important change: to have an “information society” is to live and work in the Tower of Babel. What has happened in the space of about a hundred years is that knowledge has gone from relative scarcity to superabundance and from relative uniformity to continuous mutation. Increasingly, our whole economy depends on the perpetual creation and circulation of new knowledge. The closest analogy to what we are living through might be the transition, which took place over many centuries and not in a matter of decades, from an economy based on jewels and gold to one that relied on paper money—except that in our case today, we no longer have a single legal tender, but employ a thousand different currencies at once. In our ever burgeoning marketplace, this person wants to buy a melon with kroner while that person tries to outbid her with a handful of yen, while another—to make matters even more complex—has just invented a fresh currency that has caught the melon grower’s eye. In such a complex economy, someone has to know how to move from one tender to the next. And someone will need to track the shifting rates of exchange, if only to prevent the unsuspecting from paying fifty pounds when they really owe fifty pesos. To take my metaphor one step further, let me add that this “someone”—the knowledge broker—could be us.

The word “hermeneutics” sounds atrocious to my ears, but I cannot help but think of knowledgeology as a hermeneutic enterprise. In ancient Greece (perhaps the classics are inescapable after all), Hermes was the divine messenger, whose special task was to travel from one god’s realm to another or from Mount Olympus to the earth. By making this historical allusion, which some may find pretentious and some merely banal, I am suggesting that our proper concern may lie, not with creating another discipline that can take its conventional place beside the rest, but with the task of making visible the links between one “realm” and another—not transcendent realms of timeless Being but mundane ones of transient information. It seems to me that this idea has a great deal to recommend it—and no else, so far, has taken on the job. After more than two decades of manifestos calling for “interdisciplinarity,” often underwritten by the superstars of various disciplines, little has actually happened, to put it mildly. The boundaries of the disciplines as they took shape in the 1900s still determine the organization of professors—fiscally, spatially, and in terms of the microcultures each department shelters—just as these boundaries still determine the character of the

knowledges these professors keep turning out. And really, who wants to see the disciplines transformed? If composition, by analogy, should get refigured in a dramatic way over the next decade or so, how do you expect that Pat Bizzell might feel, or Min Lu or Victor Villaneuva? All of them, and all us, have gambled our energies on the survival of the composition enterprise more or less as we know it now. And so it goes right across the curriculum. I suspect that most departments of English and history, as well as many in the social sciences, have already turned their backs on the kind of scholarship inaugurated by the unruly generation that came to prominence in the 1970s—the generation of Frederic Jameson, Hayden White, and James Clifford. If we can judge the shifting winds reliably from John Guillory's tortuous calls for a return to Literary studies with the capital "L" or from Clifford Geertz's trashing of James Clifford's latest book, working at the borders of different disciplines is an idea whose time has come—and gone.¹ Better for English to abide with Keats and Shelley and for fieldwork to be fieldwork than to aspire to the self-reflexive heights of phenomenology.

Until the university reimagines itself in ways that now look unlikely, the humanities and the social sciences seem determined to grind on in their deepening ruts or, if you prefer, to keep their institutional feet firmly planted on the bedrock of the past. Of course, the same does not apply to the sciences, which continue to evolve, intermingle, and expand in ways undreamed of only fifteen years ago. But whether specialized knowledge grows increasing self-contained or increasingly expansive and adventurous, the same problems face society at large. And these problems have been caused by the waning of something like a cultural common ground. I use the qualifier "something like" advisedly, since I regard as inherently repressive any effort by elite academic humanists—devotees of Karl Marx no less than those of Dr. Johnson—to create and impose on society at large a Great Tradition or National Identity or, for that matter, any Grand Narrative of Oppression and Liberation. But at the same time, it seems evident to me that our society is poorly served when college graduates cannot even start to explain how the Supreme Court and the Senate actually operate, are unaware that Islam is the faith of about a billion people, and could not, very probably, locate Indonesia or Poland if handed an unlabeled map.

The university's great strength is specialization, but specialization is its major weakness as well. Students can take courses in business or on the environment; they can study government and sociology; but very rarely—

actually, never—do they have the chance to explore at any length the connections between deforestation and international trade or between the political troubles of the Least Developed Countries and their failure to deal with problems of public health. Worse yet, our academic disciplines, like institutions of every other kind, have a vested interest in perpetuating this fragmentation long after their own day of usefulness has past. One good example is cultural anthropology. As many anthropologists are now keenly aware even if they seldom say so openly, their enterprise had an obvious urgency at the end of the 1800s, when the first stages of globalization had already started to exterminate ancient ways of life around the world. But now, when Bali has become a mecca for Australian surfer bums, when Pueblo Indians write international bestsellers and Tibetan monks perform their chants at Carnegie Hall, who really needs the cultural anthropologist to speak for the absent “native” or to commemorate his “endangered” culture? But much the same fate has overtaken English. At its inception, the purpose of English was to create a distinctly literary history for Great Britain and the United States by identifying major figures nearly lost to time and by creating reliable editions of their works. Beyond that, English professors were supposed to assist in the reception of these figures among a reading public still largely unfamiliar with the beauties of Chaucer or the charms of *Tom Jones*. Of course, no one could have foreseen that the momentous undertaking English set for itself would conclude in slightly less than sixty years. Certainly, by the Eisenhower decade, the great authors had been saved, the variorums complete, and the library shelves abundantly stocked with more books on Shakespeare and Wordsworth than even many scholars would care to read. Since then, much of what has happened in academic criticism might be understood as an increasingly desperate casting about for something else to do—a predicament made all the more desperate by the explosion of media that have now brought down the short-lived reign of the novel as the primary public forum for the vetting of ideas.²

Though English and cultural anthropology have run quietly dry, and probably other disciplines as well, we can scarcely expect our tenured colleagues to turn in their office keys or to close down graduate programs that continue to churn out two or three Ph.D.’s for every new job. But the death and ghostly afterlife of the disciplines still ensures that a few good minds will waste their formative years ferreting out patriarchy in the Victorian novel or learning to talk about third world women—needless to say, without meeting them—in the language of Jacques

Lacan. What does it matter, some might ask, if we expend some good minds in this harmless way or, for that matter, quite a few mediocre ones? I would respond that it matters enormously when we stop to think that more species are now vanishing from the earth than at any moment since the class Mammalia first appeared. Or that in our lifetimes we are almost certain to see human cloning, global warming, a population climbing toward the ten billion mark, and the effective breakdown of many nation states, even if the institution also sees a ghostly afterlife of its own. No prior period in human history has witnessed greater cumulative change, together with unprecedented dangers and unprecedented opportunities—not the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, nor the decade of my childhood in Baltimore, when I used to fall asleep visualizing the nuclear bomb that would fall on me in the night. But are matters really as precarious as I suggest? It's worth pointing out that since World War II the number of debtor nations has grown, not declined, as has the number of our fellow human beings who stagger on in abject poverty. While much of Africa and Latin America appear to have embraced democracy at last, their economies are apparently in retreat, while a whole swath of nations, reaching from Dagestan at Europe's door to the western border of China, is now spiraling into sheer anarchy.³

But let me give an illustration closer to home, as close as the daily paper. This morning, the *New York Times* included a report on the failure of democracy and free-market reforms to raise living standards for the poor of South America. The number of people living now in poverty on that continent has risen to 224 million, which represents the same 36 percent of total population that lived below the poverty line in 1980. Here's one part of the *New York Times's* analysis:

Far too often, Latin America's fledgling democracies have been too weak to effectively defend against . . . [corrupt elites]. For example, the elected governments of countries like Guatemala did little to stand in the way as the rich amassed tremendous wealth, allowing a coalition of agricultural growers and financial groups to block tax reforms. In Ecuador several years ago, so many rich people were evading income taxes that the government just abolished them, putting a tax on financial transactions instead. (DePalma 2)

The real solution, according to the analysis, does not lie in creating more of the formal institutions characteristic of democracies, but in widening access to education, which remains out of reach for millions

across the continent because of poor investment in primary and secondary schools. Typically, the largest share of education spending gets lavished on the universities, a policy well designed to placate those already at the top. The importance of this article seems obvious to me. Self-absorbed and ill-informed as many North Americans are, they will be forced to deal sooner or later with the problems of the hemisphere on which their long-term economic future probably rests. But sadly, most college students in the U.S. no longer read the papers from day to day, and even fewer of them leave college with the kind of background knowledge presupposed by a routine article in the *New York Times*.

Problems like the one outlined in the *New York Times* encourage my strong suspicion that the academic humanities have become, if not actually pernicious, then absurdly irrelevant. In defense of this judgment, which is bound to seem harsh to those who take on faith the importance of what they do, let me give just one more illustration. As it happens, the same edition of the *New York Times* also featured a review by Frank Kermode, entitled “Cross-Examining Milton.” The subject is *How Milton Works*, a new book by Stanley Fish, showcasing an approach, “forensic criticism,” that employs tactics taken from law to establish the meaning of literary texts. As always, Fish has managed to develop an ingenious argument, certain to inspire its share of buzz, yet I cannot help but see the project as fundamentally frivolous. In a court of law, inquiry typically turns on establishing that something really happened—a breach of contract, a theft, an assault, a homicide. You may have killed your husband or you may not have; you may have defrauded your clients or they may now be defrauding you. Unfortunately, we never know the truth for sure, and so the task of legal forensics is to reconstruct from the weight of evidence the most likely version of what occurred. As both text and [unwritten] precedent, the law furnishes the “ground rules” for this process of reconstruction. But the case of meaning in literary works is hardly comparable. While lawyers argue over legal texts in much the same way that critics argue over *Lycidas*, the interpretation of law serves a purpose beyond interpretation itself—and that is the discovery of what really happened and, more broadly, the preservation of justice in the conduct of social life. But literary interpretation has no purpose beyond itself: it is as though lawyers gathered in the courtroom simply to defeat one another in exegesis and then to take pleasure in the brilliance of it all.

While Kermode would surely greet my line of reasoning with scorn, his review makes it clear that Fish’s critical innovation has produced few

real gains in understanding. He finds Fish's reading of *Paradise Lost* to be "faulty" and alleges that Fish "appears to misunderstand" *Samson Agonistes* "even more completely." Kermode lists other objections as well:

In the course of his [book] Fish does some close analysis of particular texts, sometimes brilliantly, sometimes far-fetchedly, as when he wants the word "raised" in "Paradise Lost" to mean not only what it seems to mean but also its opposite, "razed"; or when he finds, in Milton's account of the war in heaven, too unwieldy a bundle of sexual puns. (In his quest for puns he incorrectly glosses the phrase "propounded terms/Of composition" in the same passage.) And why should he find evidence of evil in the ambiguities of Satan when, on his own account, the good guys also use them? (3)

Given these objections, we might expect that Kermode would wrap up his review by damning Fish's enterprise, but in fact he could end with scarcely higher praise. "Fish's forensic cogency," Kermode writes, is "almost always a delight, even when overingenious or wanton. 'How Milton Works' is a very distinguished book, and it should restore Milton to the center of critical interest" (3). Such a laudatory judgment may seem puzzling until we understand what both Kermode and Fish already recognize—that criticism has one purpose beyond itself, notwithstanding what I claimed a page ago. And that purpose, finally, is not to establish literary truth, whatever literary truth might be, or even to forge connections between literature and law, but simply to keep English studies alive. And Kermode says as much: the key word in his last assessment is "distinguished," which signals that Fish has succeeded in shoring up the prestige of his profession, even by concocting arguments that are absurd on their face or outright wrong, as Kermode acknowledges.

But is it really such a triumph? "Raised" and "razed," sexual puns, the ethics of ambiguity—could anything be more threadbare, immature, and insignificant? I do not mean to suggest that reading Milton is a waste of time, nor do I believe that social justice should be our sole concern. Nevertheless, as inhabitants of a knowledge society—a society where knowledge keeps developing, often in unforeseen directions—we need to exercise *some* principle of selection. Given that almost any human activity can be made into the object of specialized study and can be studied literally without end, we might do well to ask which forms of knowledge matter most in our time—that is, which forms of knowledge touch most consequentially on our lives and which ones are most important for our future as individuals and as a society? I cannot in good conscience

argue that the forensic criticism of *Paradise Lost* deserves equal time with global warming or the disappearance of species. Even if my rhetoric of crisis turns out to be hyperbolic and even if the future should prove more utopian than anyone now anticipates, does it not stand to reason all the same that our society would benefit more substantially from people who know something of world trade and string theory than from people who have read *Areopagitica*? Of course, English does not bear all the responsibility for the university's failure to prepare its graduates for the life of their own times. With every field struggling to prepare hyperspecialists while carving out its slice of resources, the logic of the disciplines as a whole strongly gravitates against the general knowledge I see as the potential ground of composition. Nor are all the disciplines alike in their capacity to address the problem. With technology developing so rapidly, I cannot imagine that programs in computer science or genetic engineering would tack on substantial new requirements in, say, the social consequences of the web or the economics underlying genetic engineering. The social sciences and humanities, by contrast, might play a more syncretic role, but they show few signs of doing so to date.

For those of us who wish to step into the breach, perhaps the major challenge lies in freeing ourselves from the conceptual legacy of our training in English studies. If some compositionists have at last turned their backs on "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Lottery," many continue to conceive their proper task as the teaching of "the text," be it the cultural text, the social text, or merely the old-fashioned five-paragraph theme. In other words, we show our bastard origins most clearly when we begin by divorcing knowledge from the contexts in which that knowledge serves some real-world purpose—the contexts I would like to call "action horizons." Instead of starting with the primacy of action, we continue to treat language as a subject in itself, just as we were trained to do in reading poetry, where language has no context other than the class and no purpose other than to be read. But there are alternatives: for example, we might think of reading and writing as modes of involvement with the lived world. In a first-year composition class, students might learn something, say, about the environmentalists' notion of "carrying capacity," instead of wasting time deconstructing some poor author's "representations" of nature. I suppose most of us could benefit, as well, from learning more about stem-cell technology, instead of inducing our students to critique the "discourse" of Monsanto's advertising. By the same token, we might actually study international trade, although to do

so we will probably need to set aside the Rube Goldberg paradigms concocted by the superstars of postcolonial studies. I will even go so far here as to propose that the whole enterprise of treating knowledge as a “text” is the sheerest pseudoscience, on a par with phrenology or astrology—also disciplines whose subjects are purely fanciful.

We make a serious mistake—and, for our profession, a fatal one—when we take literary language as the starting point of our considerations, because literary language is unique in its purely fictive character, its lack of any action horizon or determinate real-world reference. In fact, it is the pressure of facticity—the pressure brought to bear on us by a world that typically resists us and by people who often see that world in ways very different from our own—that the ideology of “text” ignores. If we set aside the case of literary language, then, reading and writing stand revealed as inseparably linked to the asking of questions about the world for the purposes of action in concert with others. But the attempt to teach writing in the name of “textuality” is no less absurd and fruitless than the attempt to teach science without actually doing science—without actually engaging in a range of practices from which scientific knowledge arises. Of course, this desire to invent a knowledge that can stand above or outside of action is just what theorists of science like Donna Haraway have undertaken; but then, no one ever came away from her massive tomes with a working knowledge of cybernetics or oncology or anything else. The crude truth is that people cannot learn to paint simply by explicating paintings; they cannot learn to play an instrument by criticizing musicians. The kind of “science studies” Donna Haraway exemplifies has created the illusion of knowledge, a knowledge ostensibly superior to science itself when in practice it is utterly autistic. No less than deconstruction and cultural studies, it disguises its paralysis by evoking grand political change, but these evocations are also chimerical, since critique is no substitute for a genuine, real-world politics, which very few of our luminaries dare to offer us.

I am not suggesting that we should abandon the desire to think critically about the consequences of projects like genetic engineering. In fact, I believe that writing courses are the one place in the curriculum where consequences and connections might be explored, but I feel that there can be no methodology or paradigm that tells us in advance which consequences we should discover or which connections we should trace out. The belief in an all-purpose system of inquiry is the El Dorado of cultural conservatives and also of the marxist left: for the former, truth already

waits for us somewhere in the past; for the latter, it already waits for us in the revolution to come. But I believe that our profession's legitimate interest lies with the contingencies of the present moment, and in this spirit I would say that the search for consequences and connections must begin with pragmatic information, not with philosophic or ideological truth. What this means for us as compositionists is that the teaching of writing unconditionally demands a working knowledge of economics, science, politics, history, and any other disciplines impinging on matters of broad public concern. This working knowledge might be gained from formal study, and we might also pick it up on the fly. But an hour with Benjamin Barber or Susan Blackmore is, in my view, time far better spent than a decade with Quintilian or James Berlin.⁴ If we know something real about something real, then our colleagues might at least respect us, an improvement in our current situation that neither the Great Rhetor of ancient Rome nor his Great Successor of Purdue, Indiana, can bring about.

I fully recognize how unnerving—even deeply shocking—this argument might strike people in our field, especially when our struggle for respect has often prompted us to ally ourselves with “theory,” which we have tacitly and correctly recognized as the most prestigious form of knowledge in English studies. The success of the move strikes me as debatable, however; I can't imagine that most literary theorists would ever return the favor by citing colleagues in composition. In fact, our effort to dignify ourselves by drawing on literary theory serves only to reinstate the whole hierarchy that has for so long kept us in our place. We need instead to create an alternative way of thinking that privileges our specific situation and our particular needs. It does us no good if we blithely celebrate the “production” of knowledge over “consumption” and then turn once again to epistemology. We need, in other words, an approach that starts with the synthetic activity from which knowledge arises. If our training in English taught us anything, however, it has taught us to view such an approach as “instrumentalist”—as the philosophical equivalent of a frontal lobotomy.⁵ This contempt for working knowledge and the horizon of real-world engagement has an august lineage. For Plato, as for most of the Athenian elites, work was the curse of slaves; practical knowledge by its very nature dulled the mind and prevented ascent to higher levels of understanding. The carriage maker might know how to fasten wheels to the axle; the potter might know how properly to prepare the clay; but the knowledge of the philosopher was different in kind and not simply in degree. The goal of philosophy was truth and beauty and wisdom: strictly

speaking, the philosopher had no interest in what we today would call knowledge—finance, chemistry, medicine, and so on. But for the modern humanities, the major exponent of this otherworldliness was Matthew Arnold. In *The Function of Criticism* and *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold rescued the arts and letters by celebrating what amounts to their uselessness. To the “philistines” he relegated the work of creating railroads and discovering the cures for typhoid fever. Precisely because the man of letters knew nothing about these ordinary things, he could offer the higher, more encompassing, and more critical vision. Like the speaker in the poem *Dover Beach*, the critic alone surveyed the “darkling plain” while “ignorant armies” went on struggling below.

Although our marxists are usually quite ready to proclaim the decisive importance of “materiality,” together with the human labor that has given human life its shape, neither Marx nor his epigones in composition have managed to renounce altogether the idealist legacy that inspired Arnold. While Marx imagined that he had built his philosophy on the foundations laid down by Darwin, modern Darwinists understand what modern marxists do not: there is no evolutionary telos, no direction to history. The only truth of evolution is that species evolve under the pressures of natural selection. These species may become more complex over time, or they may become less complex; more social, or less; more intelligent, or less. What this means for humankind is not simply that there are no guarantees, but also that the perpetual remaking of our lives is fundamentally experimental. Only after the fact can we ever know if our activity has brought us greater happiness or has plunged us into deeper misery. The spread of globalization may look like an utter disaster, but it probably explains why the U.S. and China have not already launched a new Cold War. And it has probably helped to break the stranglehold of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) in Mexico. While I admit that globalization holds the possibility of undermining the lives of working people around the world, hastening the death of the environment as well, I want to study the issue in its real complexity, instead of using every shred of evidence to confirm a view I already hold.

What might this all mean, in a practical sense, for those of us who teach writing? On my desk right now I have letter from the mayor of Somerville, New Jersey, and in it he tells the story of a Rutgers undergraduate who completed a planning document as her research project for one of our courses in “Writing for Business and the Professions.” After submitting the paper, she sent a copy to the city’s Planning Board,

and then to her surprise they incorporated it into their own documents. At the same time, they offered her a job after graduation. I have received letters like this one on other occasions as well: from students who wrote grant proposals that went on to get funded; from the editors of various law reviews; and even from the dean of a medical school commending the “Writing in the Sciences” course his daughter took last year. About three weeks ago I received an email with the heading “just to keep in touch,” from a former student in our internship program, who now writes for Fox 5 Television in New York. Openly or otherwise, many of my colleagues in English have turned up their noses at achievements like these, while the marxists in my own field have denounced me as the tool of an oppressive economic regime. What good does it do, they might remonstrate, to add a few acres of open space to a midsized bedroom community, when the change we really need is a total transformation—the complete overthrow of capitalist patriarchy and advent of heaven on earth. Of course, our marxists have no idea how such a change might actually happen, other than through the practice of continuous critique. Nor can they say what their paradise will look like specifically. (Will there be representative government? Will people still have money? Will people still get married and have last names? Will the state raise the children? Will kids still get an allowance?) In my view, no one benefits from this sort of absurdly long-range dreaming, just as no one eats in the long term, but only meal by meal. How concretely to revise land-use policies qualifies as genuine knowledge in my instrumentalist book. By contrast, how to tease out suppressed class conflict in a beer commercial is not just a waste of time but a destructive fraud, since it encourages the unwitting to suppose that they actually know something or have really made some kind of difference in the world, when all they have done is to watch TV and whine about it. And, of course, they still drink the beer.

Following the course I have charted out would probably entail that we relinquish forever our hopes for the status of a discipline on the model of English, with a canon of our own and so forth. But I believe that disciplinarity is not what we need now. The great repressed of the humanities is the transience of knowledge. Yes, everyone recognizes that *The Canterbury Tales* and Shakespeare will live forever, but who reads, or even remembers, Charles Hall Grandgent or E. M. W. Tillyard—the first, a leading Dante scholar of his day; the second, *the* authority on the Renaissance? Somewhere, even now, a Ph.D. candidate has on her desk a copy of Tillyard’s tiny opus *The Elizabethan World*

Picture or Grandgent's massive study *Dante Alighieri*, but these scholars, and the works of countless scholars just like them, are nothing more than antiquarian curiosities. This is the fate that awaits all scholarship. The day may not be far off when Frederic Jameson is as forgotten as Granville Hicks, his marxist counterpart half a century earlier. Our historians of criticism may already have started penning their sprawling chapters on "The Age of Derrida," yet increasingly it seems that this great man is destined to occupy, not a large, enduring place in our hearts and minds, but a two-foot expanse on the library shelf, after Henri Bergson and before Jean-Paul Sartre, also leading lights of French philosophy in their time.

If you don't believe me, you might conduct a brief experiment for yourself. Go to your nearest library and find an anthology of criticism published before 1970. For the sake of honesty, I just now pulled one at random from the stacks where I often work, *Contemporary American Literary Criticism*, a collection "selected and arranged" by James Cloyd Bowman, A.M., Litt. D., and published in 1926 by Henry Holt. Here are the names of the critics featured: James Russell Lowell, Walt Whitman, J. E. Spinnard, H. L. Mencken, W. C. Brownell, Irving Babbitt, Grant Showerman, Stuart P. Sherman, Percy H. Boynton, Van Wyck Brooks, Sherwood Anderson, Robert Morss Lovett, Carl Van Doren, Irwin Edman, Llewellyn Jones, Theodore Maynard, William McFee, John Macy, Henry Seidel Canby, Amy Lowell, Conrad Aiken, Fred Lewis Pattee, George Woodberry. Setting aside the canonical authors included in the collection to lend authority to the rest, ask yourself how many of these scholars have you ever heard of and how many, or how few, have you actually read.

I don't mean to suggest that these essays are not *worth* reading; I assume that many of the writers in the collection have something important to say and say it with intelligence, skill, and conviction. But the fact remains that the one inescapable mission of the university is the continuous production of new knowledge, and this requires, in turn, the continuous displacement of knowledge no longer new. I understand, of course, that this claim runs counter to much of the explicit ideology underlying archival disciplines such as literary studies, which has consistently claimed to preserve the heritage of the past. These claims notwithstanding, the persistence of a canon or of quasi-permanent categories, such as genre and historical periods, should not mislead us into believing that all scholarship up to the present day tells a coherent, collective story in which the hero is

“the profession” or “criticism” or, simply, “the advancement of learning.” I suggest instead that academic knowledge does not evolve organically and incrementally like a conversation among leisured interlocutors, but is driven forward haphazardly by a complex manifold of forces.

It is these forces that we must understand better than we do, not only if we want to teach writing in the way I have suggested—in conjunction with real-world social practices—but also if we want the teaching of writing to continue as a quasi-autonomous enterprise. Chris Anson’s narrative should remind us that the growing desperation of English studies may end with the historical tragedy of our reabsorption in the tradition of *belles lettres*. Anson’s account is important not least of all because it shows the naivety of all our talk about discourse communities, professionalism, and so on. It seems to me that Anson did everything a person in his position could do. He published voluminously; he won numerous awards for teaching and administration; he earned a national reputation. All of these achievements should have invested him with institutional power—at least if we accept the conventional thinking about the university and the disciplines. But they didn’t, and instead of wringing our hands as compositionists often do (though not Anson himself, I’m glad to see), we need to think again about the politics of knowledge. I would like to close with a few speculations on that subject—as prolegomena to future research.

First, disciplines exist with a system of disciplines. Within that system, prestige and power get distributed hierarchically, although prestige and power may not always go hand in hand. Cosmology, for instance, enjoys great prestige, but its power depends on its continued relevance to technological innovation. At many universities, for this reason, medical schools are among the most prestigious and protected units, precisely because they can draw into their orbits enormous amounts of funding, federal and private alike. Genetic engineering, biochemistry, pharmacology, and computer science—these disciplines sit atop the pyramid because of the revenues they generate. Although many observers of the academy deplore this “commercialization,” power and prestige have always followed from the capacity to make change or else to prevent it. The difference between the humanities and the sciences is not that one has become commercialized while the other has not, but that the humanities have typically drawn their power and prestige from an avowed ability to slow down the pace of change or to arrest certain changes altogether. It was politically expedient, for example, for Americans in the years after World War II to think of England as the

Mother Country and of Europe as the land where our cousins live.⁶ Now that these alliances have come less important, Anglo-Saxon attitudes may be on the wane, and as the pace of change continues to accelerate, Americans may feel much less acutely the need to put on the brakes.

My point is not only that the various disciplines are inherently unequal, but that the prestige and power of a discipline may have little to do with the numbers of articles published or titled chairs occupied or journals linked to national organizations. The decline of English ought to disabuse us of this fantasy. More archival research on Fred Newton Scott will not increase our chances of survival in the academic struggle for resources. Our best chance lies, instead, with getting closer to the funding that sustains the academy's most prominent players. This means linking our courses to medical education, to schools of engineering, and to programs in management and business. Call me vulgar if you must, but I see medicine, the sciences, and so on, as the principal levers of social change, for good or for ill, for better or for worse, as our society decides. Turning our backs on commercialization won't give us a moral advantage; it will simply leave us all the more powerless. Please consider also that alliances with medical schools and with business and the sciences—especially alliances that entail the sharing of financial resources—would give us powerful assistance when we need it the most, on that crucial summer weekend when some part-time dean (who may or may not be sleeping with the local Donne scholar) decides to take out the axe. Of course, we can forge other alliances as well. Where I teach, for example, about a third of all our teaching assistants come from departments other than English, and these departments have so far been strong enough en bloc to foil English in its periodic forays on our territory.

We should remember, too, that the standing of the disciplines depends on public perception to some extent. Even in its moribund condition, English benefits from the persistence of a long-lived propaganda machine. Why is it, after all, that Fish's 600-page discussion of Milton has made the pages of the nation's largest paper? Is it because more people are actually reading the 1645 *Poems of Mr. John Milton*? Is it because Stanley Fish has played a crucial part in shaping the temper of our times? Obviously not. But English, over more than a century, has created a network of quasi-popular venues in the form of book reviews and topical essays. Kermode writes for the *New York Times*, Louis Menand for the *New Yorker*, Mark Edmundson for the *Atlantic Monthly*. Needless to say, composition enjoys nothing like a comparable network. Mike Rose and William

Lutz stand virtually alone as our only truly public voices. If we want to survive, this situation has to change. Instead of grooming all our graduate students for careers publishing in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* and *CCC* (not to disparage these excellent journals), we might try to prepare a few of them for a different audience. If students can be taught to write like Habermas, they can be taught to write like Bill McKibben. And if they have a working knowledge of a field that people respect—let’s say business, urban planning, or bioengineering—then they will be prepared to take up Hermes’ role, connecting our various specialists to a public often desperately in need of explanation. Of course, such writers already exist—but they tend to teach in schools of journalism, when they teach at all. Still, matters might be different. Should the day arrive when our graduates can write for truly public readerships, English might conceivably begin to fret about the prospects of *our* absorbing *them*.

NOTES

1. See Geertz’s “Deep Hanging Out” and John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital*.
2. For one of many doleful reports on the current state of English, see Andrew Delbanco. Delbanco begins his discussion by citing Carol Christ, a provost at Berkeley, who had recently written, “On every campus there is one department whose name need only be mentioned to make people laugh; you don’t want that department to be yours.” On most campuses, Delbanco suggests, that department will be English (32). His idea, however, is that English return to what it used to be. Anthropology, to its credit, has been somewhat more constructive and forward-looking in its reflections. See Grimshaw and Hart.
3. As Armando Bravo Martinez points out, “With the exception of about ten countries (the so-called Big Emerging Markets), the majority of Africa, South Asia, and Latin America has experienced mostly economic decline in the past 30 years” (70). The World Bank’s own statistics indicate that the absolute number of poor people increased over the last twenty years (World Bank). These figures, of course, are likely to downplay the depth of the failures. According to the Global Policy Forum, the number of poor grew by 17 percent between 1970 and 1985 (Gates).
4. Barber is a major political theorist, Blackmore a psychologist. See Barber and Blackmore.

5. I am well aware that my argument is at odds with the broad sweep of academic thought since Horkheimer and Adorno, whose influence I regard as a disaster for the left. For them, instrumentalism meant submission to a soulless, mechanical regimen. Critical thought was supposed to begin, by contrast, with the repudiation of means-ends rationality: instead of asking “how,” the practitioner of critical theory must ask “why.” But my objection is that without a knowledge of the “how,” discussions of the “why” become silly, arcane, and ineffectual. See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*.
6. For an elaboration of this argument, see Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*. Actually, Readings should have entitled his book *Literary Studies in Ruins*.