

English and the Future of the Humanities

A position paper by Patricia Waugh, University of Durham

I was recently asked by Matthew Reisz of the THES to reflect on this topic for a feature on the future of the humanities, written by him as a response to a forthcoming book by Martha Nussbaum voicing fears that the humanities are under attack and in decline and that civilization will inevitably suffer (similar debates have run at different moments of the twentieth century- the 20s to 30s, in particular, and the end of the 50s and early 60s). Incidentally (or not), each of these moments was characterized by economic squeeze or perceptions of crisis or decline and coincidentally (or not) each produced some of the most profound and significant works across the disciplines of the humanities and the arts. The more I thought about it, the more I felt that economic threat - unless it brings with it direct censorship or suppression of thought or discriminatory politics - doesn't necessarily entail loss of human or cultural significance, nor does it inevitably bring decline in the intellectual quality of a discipline such as English. In a time when thoughts seem to have turned once again to the meaning and recovery of the 'virtues', necessity can still be the mother of them (just as complacency can feed off plenty): there is no doubt that the humanities are being squeezed economically, but there is also much to celebrate and affirm about the health of the discipline of English. I discovered from Matthew, however, that I seemed to be the only one of his correspondents from the humanities not bent over by doom and gloom. (I am certainly not denying that there is much to be anxious about, and much to be anxious about, in particular, on behalf of the coming generation of scholars in a shrinking market for employment.) But my thinking was focused on issues around the *qualitative*: focused on evidence of intellectual quality and disciplinary energy, rather than examining more quantitative effects of economic squeeze (for which task I am in any case poorly equipped). I don't see science as inevitably a threat to the future of the humanities (as many other correspondents did), but as a shared intellectual endeavor, and I believe that knowledge should be as democratically available and as creatively transferred as possible: the most illuminating discoveries are often at the edge of a disciplinary boundary, sometimes forging new inter- or multi-disciplinary alignments or networks but also, in the process, often raising a more finely tuned awareness of the particular strengths and abiding insights of one's own discipline. So here are some thoughts about the nature of English Studies sent to Matthew (and also sent on to Linda as president of CCUE, and which she suggested posting up here).

There is a strong recognition within English Studies that, in the current economic climate, especially with growing concern about research 'impact' and its possible interpretations and ramifications, the humanities is under pressure to make explicit the value of its research and contribution to social flourishing. But there is evidently still a general unawareness amongst the wider public (and even amongst Vice-Chancellors) about what goes on in the humanities and of their appropriate role in the contemporary world. So there is some need to raise perceptions of what we are doing and why it is important, and to engage with current issues and to strive to capture the imagination of the wider public if we are to continue to be supported and funded. But English Studies has entered interesting times at the moment and, in my view, is in a stronger position than it might think. It just needs to get the message across to those outside: especially to those who are not its students or teachers. (We know we are valuable!).

Here is a brief recent history as a way into understanding where the discipline is now and where it seems to be heading: the great boom of the seventies to the nineties was literary theory which, although in effect, built out of other disciplines- especially psychoanalysis, linguistics, anthropology, continental philosophy and political theory – took root in English because of the discipline's attentiveness to language and its axiomatic sense of the complex relations between word and world. Positivist assumptions were challenged through the new mix of linguistic *a priorism*, psychoanalytic playfulness, and neo-Marxist historicising; they were given a creative and compelling turn within English, unconstrained as it has been by analytical frameworks or strictly empiricist methodologies. This more creative spin to ideas, now referred to as 'theory', then quickly reinfused its originating disciplinary domains to reinvigorate even as it exasperated their practitioners, enlivening even as it provoked contempt. (Interestingly, these originating disciplines were mainly housed in the social sciences, and not in the humanities as traditionally conceived.) The new ideas were largely ignored by historians, philosophers, and most theologians, and they flourished in departments of literature and in the social sciences.

By the nineties, however, these new disciplinary energies were largely played out: but they seemed to have barred any simple return to 'prat crit' or pure formal appreciation of great literary works. The endless positing of questions about political identities or ideologies or deconstructionist rituals now suddenly seemed the worrying of the carcass of an old song (to misquote R.S.Thomas) and suddenly no one wanted to be a postmodernist any more (though a new category of Late Modernism seems to be springing up all around!). By the nineties, British literary criticism had taken a marked culturally materialist turn, just as historicism had colonized the discipline in the US and in both contexts often manifesting itself in a retreat from engagement with canonical writers and towards the exploration of less proximate cultural contexts or 'marginalised' voices who, queer, women, ethnic minority, working class, and therefore readily 'identity political', allowed the continuation of a 'soft' version of theory through modes of continuing cultural introspection: this is English as cultural studies or cultural history. All of this has been important, but creative speculation seemed sometimes more muted and on the wane as the new historicism seemed often not terribly distinguishable from the supposedly old and vanquished varieties. As the historicizing fervor increased its grip, it seemed for a while as though the aesthetic too was now only a distant glint in an Oxbridge eye. In short, the subject began to seem worthy but sometimes, dare one say it, intellectually or aesthetically or creatively a little dull, opening up important new political contexts and yet not seeming to find a disciplinary voice that it might categorically call its own or even, at times, employ effectively to speak to the new groups that it claimed to engage and represent. There seemed a danger that the exciting questions of the 1960s had hardened into the tired rituals of a marginalized profession. English too seemed headed for the doldrums.

However, the last few years have seen a swing again to a newly energized, more speculative and more creative engagement with other disciplines, with the broader culture, and with wider publics. English is currently buoyant, expansive, recovering its confidence in its critical and creative capacities and importance: its capacity to be tellingly 'jocoserious'. In retreat are formerly expressed fears that English had become a space of stratospheric private conversation amongst initiates, a new deconstructive scholasticism, or that English was now a worthy but sometimes aesthetically blind construction of alternative cultural histories. English now includes the study of film, folk-tales, stories from around the world, creative attention to the rhetorics of politicians and pundits and spin doctors; it thinks about what it is to be human and of the pictures that humans build of themselves in stories around the globe. It engages with the history of science and intellectual thought, with evolutionary biologies and their meanings, the medicalisation of culture, ecocritical awareness, narrativisation in philosophy and science, the meanings of globalization and terror. New networks are flourishing: for the study of literature and science, literature and medicine, literature and law, of world literatures, of literature and film, chat rooms, conferences and events involving the public on everything from 'syndromes' to death and cities and the law. As a literary critic, I am currently working on a major Leverhulme funded project on 'Tipping Points' (originally a concept invented by a journalist who was not an academic) with mathematicians, geographers, historians, climatologists and economists from my university. There are many such projects flourishing and a growing awareness of the skills and insights that each discipline can bring to the problems faced by an increasingly globalised world. Despite the economic gloom, it feels livelier than ever.

But why should English seem more buoyant than ever? Why does English not seem to share the doom and gloom currently expressed in other disciplines of the humanities? The 'glamour' of theory has fled and the moral authority of the years of T.S. Eliot or F.R.Leavis or the New Criticism disappeared a half century ago. No-one looks up to us as moral authorities on how to live your life and, if anything, it is now 'sciences' such as evolutionary psychology or neuroscience that are claiming authority to tell the public how to live good lives or how to find a compatible partner or why we go to war or how to deal with terror, or why markets or climates or cultures crash or overheat. Few turn to *Romeo and Juliet* or even to Terry Eagleton for such advice.

English is well-positioned to ride the tide of gloom for one major reason: it has one foot in the 'Arts' and in the creative, the speculative and the linguistically playful, and one in the 'humanities' and in rigorous thinking and evidence-based argument, in intellectual analysis and histories, rhetorical awareness and 'lucidity'. It produces creative thinkers and crafty readers, affirmative and original visionaries, and hermeneuts of suspicion. English was born with that very tension at its heart: modern English criticism grew up around the creative thinking of T.S.Eliot and Virginia Woolf, as well as the analytical rigour and positivist attentiveness of an I.A. Richards or an F.W. Bateson. In some ways,

the rather entrenched and polarized wars over 'theory' or political correctness or 'aesthetic values' versus ideological critique, had begun to obscure the real creative tension at the heart of English studies: between the creative and the critical – whether in literature itself or in criticism or scholarship or theory. It is a tension that has always been about the human need for attunement to words and the absolutely crucial role that language plays in building the worlds that we negotiate and in which we dwell and creatively reshape our lives.

In the last few years, English as a discipline has once again come to recognize this enormous strength and, rather than rehearsing old battles about 'scholarship' versus literary criticism, or positivism versus 'theory, there is a renewed sense of a shared adventure, of looking out at and building bridges to other cultures and disciplines: in using and refining language as a vehicle for nuanced affective cognition and imaginative insight in the building of new frameworks for thought and for new world pictures which help us to understand our own and other lives and cultures. Literary biography written by literary academics is a growing market and attracts a non-academic readership: literary lives are fascinating to the public! Recent biographies of Golding, Woolf, Spark, Kingsley Amis, Shakespeare have attracted interest. There is a definite sense of greater engagement with wider publics and with performers, artists, writers etc. Traditional editing is more buoyant than ever: major new editions include, eg, Orwell's complete works, the new Penguin Freud (many editors drawn from English), many Romantic poets; letters: of Eliot, Lawrence, Larkin, Amis, Beckett, and there is a flurry of new editions of major writers such as T.S Eliot currently in preparation. Interestingly, many of the new major creative writers have come out of English literature degrees, rather than history or politics or anthropology, as formerly, and have absorbed it's styles; its mix of the critical and the creative. I'm thinking here of Amit Chaudhuri, Zadie Smith, AS Byatt, Caryl Phillips, David Mitchell and many many others.

Even traditional scholars are hooking up with museums, libraries etc to find creative ways to present material to a wider public and new initiatives from the research councils and funding bodies have played a major role in funding and supporting this research. Traditional scholarship and the editing of canonical texts is stronger than ever, and the new media outlets and digital industries have helped in opening up literature to wider audiences. Reading groups have blossomed and demand for literature courses is higher than it has ever been. As philosophy has become more technical, the general public have turned more and more to novels and literary texts for the 'grand narratives' of how to live well, of how to confront the big questions of life, as well as to find out about other cultures and world issues and histories through an insight into what those histories *feel like* to the people living them. More and more people turn to poetry to find the words for complex feelings and perceptions: it isn't just Auden who is read at weddings and funerals. Creative writing has been the new growth area, on an upward rise as playful and speculative theory went into decline and half of all English degrees teach creative writing and have seen their application figures rise dramatically since its expansion.

Having one foot in intellectual history and scholarship and the other in the creative arts is the great strength and uniqueness of the discipline. In some ways, the effect of 'impact' demands and of economic squeeze has been to raise awareness of how much the discipline does offer and of the ways in which it is unique. Other disciplines have reoriented themselves towards academic styles deeply embedded in English: philosophy has moved from the purely analytical to the narrative and embodied modes of the phenomenological and to an awareness of emotion and the body and its place in thinking. Medicine now trains its students in the construction of stories and narratives as well as in ethics: the place of 'stories' in the understanding of health and flourishing, the development of empathy and the attempt to understand pain and suffering. Interestingly, both the creative writing turn and the interdisciplinary impetus have seemed to bring back traditional aesthetic questions- such as form and beauty- which are now being discovered at the heart of other disciplinary ways of looking at and understanding the world. New dialogues are flourishing across disciplines and cultures.

I think there is no area as such that is in decline, though there has been a retreat from the kind of High Theory that dominated in the eighties. Of all the humanities, I would say that English is most buoyant and I do think that this is because it straddles the creative and the critical: it builds imaginative worlds and thinks through them, but it also analyses texts as a way of critiquing the historical worlds outside of them. So, we're feeling all the pinches from the economic crisis, but the discipline is in excellent shape and, in my view, maybe even in the best shape it has been since its high-standing days of Eliot/Leavis/New Criticism and the power and influence of the so-called 'moral

aesthetic'. It is more diverse, more self-aware, both creative and intellectual, and facing outwards and not inward. There is a much deeper engagement with world issues and an awareness of how the world looks from the perspective of different groups and cultures: geographic, economic, disciplinary, and ethnic. A new influx of scholars from eastern Europe, Asia and Africa is throwing back new images of English to itself and engagement with the sciences is bringing a new awareness of its distinctive mode of operation and manner of thinking, and of the importance to culture of this kind of creative, critical, affective-cognitive, imaginative mix: new times require new ways of thinking outside the box. New world rhetorics require careful attentiveness to language. There's been a return to a sense of the enormous humanising potential of English: the 1980s and 1990s anti-humanist stridency has disappeared (though the critique of naive humanist assumptions has been thoroughly taken on board). English encourages the creative thinker and the crafty reader. The world needs both! And English is wise too: it knows (from who else but Shakespeare) that this is not the worst as long as we can say it is the worst. But it's *how* we say it that matters.

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