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The Many-Headed Hydra of Theory vs. the Unifying Mission of Teaching

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COLLEGE ENGLISH



THE (IN)VISIBILITY
OF THE PERSON(AL)
Ruth Spack

AFRICAN AMERICAN
MOURNING STORIES
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THEORY VS. TEACHING
Marshall Gregory

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THE MANY-HEADED HYDRA
OF THEORY VS. THE UNIFYING MISSION
OF TEACHING

Marshall Gregory

THE DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH AND "THE EMPTY CENTER
OF THE FIELD'S SENSE OF ITSELF"

A persistent myth in departments of English posits a golden age when tweedy English professors humanized the world with thrice-weekly doses of literary instruction, exchanged witty conversation and recondite literary allusions at the Friday afternoon sherry hour, and generally agreed with each other about which books to teach, how to teach them, and the importance of teaching them. This golden age must have ended right before I entered the field. My whole history within the discipline suggests that getting English professionals to agree in large numbers about almost anything is nearly as difficult as herding cats or training king cobras to hiss the "Hallelujah Chorus" in four-part harmony.

I do not intend to rehearse the causes of our winter's discontent—Gerald Graff and others have amply analyzed our disciplinary doings and undoings—but it is useful to observe that even when we are merely describing "the condition of our discipline" (rather than analyzing it), our constant themes are loss and gain, change and resistance to change, and the nature of the professional and intellectual anxieties produced by all of the above. John Bassett in a *College English* essay thoughtfully identifies what he takes to be the "major changes [that] have redirected the discipline," the most significant of which is surely our "redirection" toward becoming another kind of discipline altogether: "the explosion of interest in theory . . . has been the key to *the movement of literary study toward the social sciences*" (321; emphasis added). Bassett shows steelier nerves than most of us in his willingness to understate our disciplinary disunity. He sees us as being merely "redirected"

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which, after all, sounds rather tidy, as if we have things well in hand, but many English professionals today might prefer to describe our field as more “chaotic” than “redirected.” “Chaotic” may sound melodramatic, as if we have lost both direction and redirection all at once, but it does capture people’s sense that, as Yeats put it in “The Second Coming,” “the center cannot hold.” Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, paralleling Bassett, assert in their introduction to *Redrawing the Boundaries* that “practices . . . formerly taken as givens are latterly almost completely given up. . . . [C]ontinual refashioning is at the center of the profession of literary study” (5). “Major changes” and “continual refashioning” do not suggest disciplinary unity. They suggest instead a state of fragmentation that Avrom Fleishman (echoing Yeats) sums up ominously as “the empty center of the field’s sense of itself” (809), a chilling metaphor which suggests that the disagreements of theorists and scholars may swamp disciplinary cohesion for good (or for ill). My wish for disciplinary cohesion is not a wish for disciplinary orthodoxy, but when disagreement comes to such a pass, as many would agree that it has, that we disagree fundamentally about what *standards* to employ for adjudicating our disagreements, then the possibility arises that we have entered a free-fall zone of disciplinary confusion.

I would like to argue that our students—our teaching mission—offer us a way of bypassing the tangle of theoretical disagreements and gluing the fragmented pieces of our discipline back together again, not into a once-and-for-all rigidity of either structure or orthodoxy, but at least into a *shape*, into an enterprise that can define its primary aims. All agreements about aims (including pedagogical aims) will be and should be negotiated among constituencies and should be subject over time to change. To hope for agreement here is not to suppose naïvely that we can agree about pedagogy because teaching, unlike literary analysis, is somehow theory-free. I propose, however, that agreeing about principles of pedagogy is a more urgent responsibility for us than agreeing about literary theory. Canons and schools of interpretation come and go, but our students will always be with us, and tending to their development should be our first order of business. Our integrity as teachers demands that we know what we are about. If we cannot agree about texts and the ways we canonize them, cannibalize them, or cant about them, we need at least to agree about our obligations to our students. For their sake, if not our own, we need a fund of disciplinary agreement that is as operationally functional as it is theoretically negotiable.

We can and should try to find disciplinary cohesion in a concern for how our teaching contributes to our students’ intellectual and ethical development. As Fleishman says, “the field must be assessed by its instructional outcomes, the degree to which its students receive a preparation adequate for . . . undergraduates to go forth as well-informed participants in a national cultural community” (817–18). Disciplines do not exist within and for themselves. Disciplines exist to do a distinctive kind of work *in the world*, and their nature is such that they cannot accom-

plish this work directly: they must accomplish it indirectly by the influence they exert upon students. Mostly it is our students, not us, who take our disciplinary work into the world.

On this issue of being *in the world*, and especially our influence in it, English professionals tend to talk with great energy if not always with great cogency out of both sides of their mouths at once. Postmodernists with strong political and social agendas, for example, talk confidently about opposing oppression as if the postmodern tail were actually strong enough to wag the hegemonic dog. In addition, they employ an agitated vocabulary of terms like “radical” and “destabilizing,” and a rhetoric of breathless urgency intended to suggest (sometimes quite comically) that poststructural hermeneutics is as dangerous an activity and as potent a protest against political oppression as manning the barricades in an actual street war. It strains credulity to hear this kind of militant talk bruited about by paunchy tenured professors from safe and respectable universities who wouldn’t know a barricade unless it blocked the entrance to their library carrel. But out of the other side of our professional mouths, English professionals talk a language of self-doubt that sometimes borders on self-loathing, the general cause of which seems to be a despairing sense of social uselessness and disjunction. In a review of Evan Watkins’s *Work Time*, for example, Reed Way Dasenbrock identifies the “central theme” of Watkins’s book as the notion that “though English professors are relatively unconstrained in the concrete labor we engage in . . . our control over what we do doesn’t extend very far. . . . If the problem Watkins has with English professors is—to paraphrase Marx—that they have understood the world instead of changing it, Watkins, too, is an English professor doomed just to understand the world even though he too would rather change it. . . . In this he seems typical of an entire academic generation caught up in a deeply paradoxical attitude toward the profession it has joined” (542–43).

English professionals are of course free to address the world directly through speeches and books and articles, but most academics read only a few of their colleagues’ words and nonacademics are highly unlikely to read their words at all. Primarily, our disciplinary work gets advanced in the world not by what we in the sealed disciplinary chamber say to one another, but by whatever resources of mind and heart our students take away from the study of our discipline and apply to such daily tasks as making a living, choosing a spouse, raising children, deciding how to spend money, apportioning time between job and family, deliberating about moral issues, participating in the life of communities, and clarifying the values that guide conduct.

By defining our primary disciplinary project as one of developing students’ abilities and our secondary project as developing faculty careers, rather than the other way round, we can identify a common set of objectives that (I will argue) create for us the possibility of a common and unifying disciplinary mission. I hope that

most of us will agree with the six contributions that I claim the discipline of English is powerfully equipped to make to student development.

I take for granted an ethos among English professionals that makes them *want* to contribute to the development of their students' minds and hearts, an assumption I develop briefly in the following section. One cannot, however, discuss the profession of English today without confronting the many-headed hydra of theory. My second assumption, that literature is a more important form of learning and experience than theory and theorizing, puts me in conflict with some of the main currents of postmodern critical opinion, so unpacking this conflict will require more elaborate argument in the section "Theory and Literature Revisited . . ."; my call for disciplinary unity based on literary pedagogy will make no headway at all unless I start by taking on postmodern suspicions about literary experience.

THE TEACHERLY ETHOS OF ENGLISH PROFESSIONALS

Even when I have been most discouraged about the extent of pettiness, competitiveness, and unreasonableness in professional life, I have always seen ample evidence among my colleagues of a sincere and generous commitment to students' development. Gary Tate, for example, describes a generous, amiable, and companionable spirit—the spirit that George Eliot calls "fellow feeling"—typically held by English professionals about their students: "I refuse to look at my students," he says, "as primarily history majors, accounting majors, nursing majors. I much prefer to think of them and treat them as people whose most important conversations will take place *outside the academy*, as they struggle to figure out how to live their lives—that is, how to vote and love and survive, how to respond to change and diversity and death and oppression and freedom" (32). In the same issue of *College English* in which Tate writes, we find retired professor Walker Gibson, after devoting a whole career to teaching, still alive to the hope that English studies will have helped make his students more humane, tolerant, and civil in their relations with each other as citizens. Gibson concentrates on how English helps develop character by teaching language: "To teach the young the ways of language . . . makes us sensitive to the *limits of our own powers*" (287); "If language is what there mostly *is* (so to say!), then it behooves me to watch my words, for I have to live with them. The consequences of this conviction can be a spirit of caution and modesty, flexibility and good humor" (286). In any event, this teacherly concern not just to impart knowledge but to help students integrate knowledge, skills, and experience into a sustained attempt at living life more maturely, more humanely, and more effectively is, to the credit of our discipline, typical of the professionals who labor in it.

More than some other academic professionals perhaps, English professionals recognize that our students, and their teachers no less, always stand incompletely developed. We know that none of us is ever as fully developed in intellect, heart,

feeling, insight, skill, or wisdom as we might be. And we know that the world is also incompletely developed. While it has much good in it, it has far too much ill, but we also know—and this is a crucial point for me—that *it can be made better. The world can be improved.* As long as this remains true, then it is the responsibility of us all to work at improving it, teachers and students alike. I do not view the discipline of English as an effete training in superficial refinements, such as knowing which fork to eat the salad with, or knowing that Bizet, despite *Carmen*, was French rather than Spanish. Nor do I view English as a discipline which theorizes about literature in such arcane terms and at such a distance from living and dying that it makes both the discipline and its literature irrelevant to these two poles of existence. Rather, I view English as a discipline whose skills, insights, and wisdom apply profoundly to the domains of living, working, creating, and dying. It is in these domains that the discipline of English may, by means of literary study and a conscientious teacherly ethos, make a lasting and substantial contribution to the world in whose ongoing improvement and persistent imperfections we all have a stake.

THEORY AND LITERATURE REVISITED ONCE MORE: PLATO AND POSTMODERNISTS AS ALLIES

For the last twenty years at least, our discipline has been in the grip of the postmodern hydra, theorizing about literature and theorizing about theory with single-minded intensity and astounding success. As the hydra image suggests, postmodernism is not a unitary position. It is instead a group of positions, not all of them fully compatible and many of them still developing. Since the identity of the beast is characterized in so many different ways in so many different places, clarity may be served if I here offer my version of postmodernism, that is, the version I refer to when I use “postmodernism” in this essay. I do not intend my characterization to be definitive or conclusive—I certainly will not expect all postmodernists to agree with it—but I do expect my characterization to be functional for my purposes and close enough to issues that lie at the heart of various postmodern “takes” to justify it. The version of postmodernism I deal with here is configured by six premises that combine certain postmodern attitudes with certain poststructuralist assumptions.

Postmodernism is, first, anti-foundational and anti-transcendent: that is, it rejects the possible existence of transcendent metaphysical entities or principles from which totalistic schemes of interpretation or evaluation may be derived or on which they may be solidly founded. Needless to say, this premise disallows belief in any ultimate, absolute, or universal Truths.

Second, the postmodernism I am addressing posits not Truth, or even truth, but perspectives: not ultimate insights, but relativistic points of view limited by contingencies rooted in history, culture, language, politics, gender, economics, and so

on. These contingencies constitute various forms of embodiment—linguistic embodiment, historical embodiment, cultural embodiment, gender embodiment—which condition and shape perspectives that can only be expressed in rhetorical modes of persuasion, not oracular modes of finality.

Third, postmodernism views all aspects of culture and nearly all aspects of human nature (except those few tied most directly and determinatively to physical anatomy or structure) as socially constructed rather than as given or natural, and thus amenable to change without the potential complication of violating any essential nature of either things or persons.

Fourth, postmodernism denies the referentiality of acts of language to anything but other acts of language. Language is assumed not to give information about the world, but only about the subjective states or relative points of view of individual language users or discourse communities. The only world we can know is the world of discourse about a larger world we cannot know. Given language's infinite slipperiness, however, we cannot even "know" our own or others' discourses. We can experience them, but not know them. Thus the meaning of literary texts is, like the meaning of all other texts as well, infinitely indeterminate or deferred. The criticism of literary texts constitutes neither interpretation nor explication, but expresses only the critic's subjective responses to the text-as-prompt or text-as-language-stimulus. Literary meaning as such is an illusion.

Fifth, postmodernism is deeply disillusioned with Western liberal political philosophy and processes, deeming liberalism to have corrupted itself in the pursuit of a status quo favoring middle-class power groups. Liberalism has, furthermore, constructed an array of ideologies to disguise social oppression and to preserve the status quo, and has coopted writers and literature as two of its primary mechanisms for furthering its self-interested ideologies. Writers, who are said to have "disappeared" as autonomous agents, play the role of shills in a power game that limits them to writing master narratives but encourages them to think that they are freely choosing their own subjects and styles. The disappearance of authorial autonomy has been accompanied, naturally, by the disappearance of authorial intentionality.

Sixth, postmodernism supposes that deconstruction (texts betraying their ostensible aims) and a hermeneutics of suspicion (practiced by resistant readers) will expose literature's complicity in supporting and advancing middle-class ideologies of power. A hermeneutics that exposes capitalist, colonialist, racist, and sexist ideologies, postmodernists believe, will help democratize a world presently closed to many marginalized groups. (For more on the distinction between postmodernism and poststructuralism see Morawski and Murphy; see especially the helpful anatomizing of poststructuralism in Harris.)

To give postmodernism credit, theorizing has made all of us less naïve about many issues that most English professionals seldom thought about in years past. We have become less naïve about language, and less naïve about such concepts as "lit-

erary value," "classic," "meaning," "greatness," "gender," "interpretation," and "transcendent." Postmodernism has been especially successful at showing us how to analyze the relationship of literature to configurations of power. However, like the strong man in the circus who is too muscle-bound to possess flexibility and speed, postmodernism's very strengths are also the sources of its most crippling weakness. I refer specifically to postmodernism's sense of superiority over literature.

Postmodernism's patronizing attitude toward literature is expressed in persistent suggestions that while much literature has always been blindly unaware of its unfortunate and degrading political alliances, contemporary theory could never be caught with its political or epistemological pants down. Postmodernists, following the lead of Derrida and Foucault, claim that benighted artists—poor unconscious slugs—just haven't known what master scripts they were possessed by; postmodernism has come, like a nontranscendent Messiah dressed in robes of relativism, not only to reveal the absence of autonomy in those very persons that traditional humanism once took to be the most autonomous among us, our writers and artists, but to show that the only real possessors of autonomy are those same postmodern critics who can show everyone else's failures at it.

Postmodern critics never explain how they achieve their own autonomy *against* the imputed truth of their leading thesis about the inescapability of cultural and political hegemony. According to this thesis, autonomy is just what cultural hegemony denies to all its members, yet it is clear that postmodernists believe themselves to be *at least* autonomous enough to see that the rest of us, and the literature we read, are not autonomous. Postmodernists are somehow free to tell us all, including our canonical authors, that we and they are merely the offspring of "master narratives" coursing through history, while postmodernists are historically innocent, apparently the offspring of nothing but their own critical intelligence. The rest of us are so mired in history that master narratives constitute our only heritage. Critical intelligence is reserved for the postmodern elites who deny it to the rest of us—and to the "great books" we are supposed to cease admiring on the grounds that such books support various forms of social oppression.

Postmodernism's patronizing superiority creates a hermeneutics of suspicion which sniffs at literature as a serious source of ill-smelling social and political decay. Both this attitude and the hermeneutics rest on premises generated by the postmodern epistemology of constructed knowledge. In the postmodernism narrative of knowledge, criticism and philosophy are the twin protagonists. Together criticism and philosophy have discovered the truth about the nonfoundationalist, constructed nature of knowledge, while literature (especially traditional realist literature) remains ignorant of this truth and deludes itself that its literary representations show something essential about the human condition, or something fundamental about truth, or something transcendent to human experience. Because of literature's naïveté about constructed knowledge (and thus its susceptibility to being

coopted by master narratives), postmodernism has given us a corrective hermeneutics: not just critical reading but “suspicious” and “resistant” readings (readings “against the grain” of literature’s claim to representational objectivity); not just self-conscious readers but readers whose kind and degree of self-consciousness put to shame literature’s unselfconscious complicity in oppressive values (patriarchal, colonial, ethnocentric, and so on).

Despite the extent to which this epistemology of constructed knowledge has been granted a kind of “most favored nation” status among postmodern critics, it has not escaped recent and devastating criticism that undermines much of the self-congratulatory high ground upon which postmodernism has stood in order to look down on literature. In a penetrating essay on “truth and methods” in *College English*, Reed Way Dasenbrock asserts that “the arguments against the possibility of objective truth which have seemed so convincing over the past generation nonetheless presuppose the very notion of truth they have worked so hard to dislodge” (560). Dasenbrock’s argument, which goes to the heart of this important epistemological issue, shows that the primary dictum of postmodern thought—that all knowledge is constructed, perspectival, dependent on community-specific conventions (rather than foundational or “given” and accessible to objective inquiry), and therefore contingent—is not itself a contingent or perspectival claim. It is, in fact, a universal and objectivist claim—it asserts *in advance* of evidence or experience what *must* be true *universally* of all other positions—and therefore deconstructs its own content, the very content from which both its hermeneutic practice and its social agenda derive:

[N]o conventionalist account of truth can argue against an objectivist account without falling into self-contradiction, since it is the very heart of conventionalism that truth-theories are community-specific. . . . There can be no principled rejection of a belief in objectivity since such a principled rejection implies a belief in the very transparadigmatic standards of discussion and inquiry which it rejects. Any principled argument against objectivity presupposes it. (557)

If the postmodern epistemology of constructed knowledge can be questioned so powerfully, where does this leave postmodernist criticism of literature’s uncritical faith in an alleged literary correspondence to transcendent or essentialist values? It appears that if literature is to be validly criticized from a postmodernist perspective, the criticism will have to be advanced on grounds other than the allegedly superior truth-theory of constructed knowledge. Dasenbrock makes clear that this theory itself will have to be rethought, which means that postmodernism will need to rethink its overall relationship to literature as well. It may still turn out to be the case that literature conveys no essential knowledge of the human condition or human nature, but it now seems clear that the postmodern “proof” of literature’s failure to do so—its alleged inability to understand its own socially and politically constructed nature—hardly stands up under scrutiny. If literary content

is to be *justifiably* subject to a hermeneutics of suspicion, the justification so far offered by postmodern criticism falls far shorter than has been claimed.

Moreover, outside the domain of philosophical dispute, postmodernism's smug superiority over literature has been a real liability to teachers interested in helping students acquire intellectual and existential maturity through disciplinary studies in English. Many postmodern critics assume that teaching students the techniques of resistant reading helps make them more intellectually alert and mature, but the arguments that I have seen in support of this view are not convincing, nor does it coincide with my experience as a teacher. My teaching experience suggests that one of the greatest advantages of literary education is its capacity to call students out of themselves, to create for student readers compelling invitations to imagine different conditions of the world and different kinds of human feelings and motives far beyond their own experience. As a teacher I am profoundly convinced that this "going out" of themselves is salutary for students, that it makes direct and positive contributions to their maturity. This salutary departure from the home base of ego and ethnocentrism requires, however, "assentive" rather than "resistant" reading. Resistant reading *blocks* the extension of the self achieved by "going out." Instead of valuing the wider worlds to be experienced vicariously through literature, resistant reading values a critical and suspicious attitude. From this point of view, assentive reading becomes a kind of fraud or delusion. To make judgments about literary fraudulence or delusion *soundly*, however, requires more experience both of literature and of the world than most students possess. Students in fact need sustained assentive reading as the best preparation for informed resistant reading. *Uninformed* resistant reading too easily turns into nothing more than an ideological knee-jerk, and no good teacher confuses ideological knee-jerks with intellectual acumen or general maturity.

Postmodernism's condescending annoyance with literature's relative unconsciousness—its apparently unthinking extravagance, its emotionalism, its frequent reliance on the fantastic or the coincidental, and its acceptance of the world *as it is*—turns out to have ancient roots. Mark Edmundson convincingly argues that

in the work of Bloom, de Man, Derrida, and other figures in contemporary theory, there exist drives, analogous to Plato's, to demean literary art, or to subsume it in some higher kind of thought. For at some point—shall we say 1966 . . . the year of Derrida's three major volumes . . . the tone of Anglo-American criticism . . . became less celebratory, more inquisitive, even inquisitorial (more Platonic). . . . If the proposed analogy between Plato's critique of poetry and current critical practices suggests anything, it is never to underestimate the hostility that literary critics may nurse toward literature. (15–17)

In other words, postmodernism's hostility to literature exists on a conceptual continuum with Plato's. This continuum can be seen in clear parallels of critical judgment: hostility toward literature's unthinking qualities, hostility toward literature's

reliance on inspiration rather than careful argument, hostility toward literature's uncritical engagement with life and its too-frequent lapses into sentimentality, buffoonery, grossness, and political and moral insensitivity. Plato, like many postmodernists today, thinks that criticism and philosophy are much more likely than the theater or literature to lead people to the truth.

Plato and postmodernism are both correct in many of their criticisms of literature, especially if we broaden "literature" to mean "fictional representation in general." Much fictional representation today is indeed, as Plato charged in his day, not only cheap, tawdry, and superficially emotional, but also uncritical and unenlightened about political power, moral responsibility, and social arrangements. Who among us would claim that romance novels, soap operas, most sitcoms, most movies, or Broadway musicals help their audiences clarify their views, live more thoughtfully, or develop greater self-control, rationality, generosity, or purpose? We are indebted to postmodernism for reaffirming Plato's salutary skepticism. Neither Plato, postmodernists, nor I put much stock in romantic gushiness about the supreme value of art, its holiness or righteousness. Even since Romanticism elevated both artists and art to transcendent status, those of us who want to question the political and moral views of a work of art have frequently been resisted with horrified tones and affronted gestures, as if questioning the moral or political integrity of any work of literature threatened to suck the life right out of art. Postmodernism has performed a useful service for the contemporary world in thumbing its nose at the alleged holiness of art and ending our thralldom to the time-honored notion that art possesses meanings beyond the reach of ethical or political criticism.

However, even after all the appropriate criticisms of literary extravagance and falseness have been made and documented, what Plato and postmodernism both miss is the truth that literature's profound engagement with life—as unconscious as this engagement may sometimes be—holistically reflects the human condition and is instructive about how life may be lived in ways that philosophy and criticism can never hope to match. Literature's power to inform life, and even to help correct it, is incalculably greater than philosophy's and criticism's, because philosophy and criticism primarily address the intellect, and human beings mostly refashion themselves by imagination, not by intellect. Imagination needs the influence of intellect in order to keep in check the dark side of its excesses, but make no mistake, it is imagination and not intellect that acts as the primary engine of human change and development. Until the hypotheses of the intellect are touched with the fire of imagination, they lie like dead coals in a grate. Literature swallows life whole, including the intellect, but is not limited to the intellect. Readers of literature are potentially enlarged in heart and mind in ways that philosophy and criticism cannot help them achieve because truly engaged literary reading offers us a form of learning that is more like leading another life than any other form of learning. The power to give readers a

detailed and concrete sense of how other lives are lived—how things *feel in another* life—is a power that lies beyond both philosophy and criticism.

The quintessential feature of human existence is that we lead not one life but many, and we lead most of them in the imagination. It is infinitely more instructive to live multiple lives through literary engagement—vicariously and hypothetically, to be sure, but concretely, vividly, and compellingly as well—than to live just one life. Our bodily lives are limited to discrete moments of space and time, but the imagined lives we lead through participation in fictions range across the totality of time, space, and human experience. Literature can take us everywhere and anywhere: into different historical times, into gender experiences different from our own, into different cultures, into different stages of life, and into different racial and ethnic circumstances, all of which yields a wider and deeper kind of education about human conditions than any other form of learning. Philosophy and criticism can give only thin accounts of existence; literature gives thick accounts. Literature, in its vividness, its texture, its variety, and its capacity to evoke emotional identification, invites us with a compelling sense of the value of individual experience to assume a comprehensiveness of views and feelings that criticism and philosophy can only try to argue us into adopting. As Dan Morgan says, “Literature has an *unfolding* quality which deepens appreciation upon rereading, as the readers’ own stores of knowledge and their own perspectives and values in life evolve” (499).

I sympathize with most of postmodernism’s political and social goals, but when postmodernism supposes that it can influence reform better than literature because it tells a more precise version of the truth and can, in addition, point out where literature fails, it is simply wrong. In this supposition it barks up a philosophical tree when all of us would rather live in a literary forest. It is hubris on the part of postmodern critics to assume that telling literature where it has gone wrong means that postmodernism’s power for improving social and political conditions is greater than literature’s. Critics of dance or music may be able to show where great dancers or musicians make mistakes, but it does not follow from such criticism either that the splendid quality of great performers is appreciably diminished by the mistakes they make, or that in discrediting these great performers the critics will teach a more correct or refined taste to their readers. Dickens’s *Bleak House* and Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*—to cite only two texts—have done incalculably more to move people’s hearts to sympathy with the sufferings of their fellow creatures and to inspire them to resist entrenched forms of social power than all the texts of postmodern theory put together. Postmodernism’s belligerent and ungenerous tendency to pit its own discursive insights against literature’s emotional power will only wear criticism out and in the end render it shrill, dogmatic, and ill-tempered. The intellectual authority of criticism cannot replace the holistic representations of literature. No one would ever choose to take the works of Jacques Derrida or Frank Kermode rather than the works of Dickens or Shakespeare to a life of solitary banishment on a desert island.

Criticism may refine life, *and this is not a contemptible contribution to make*, but literature *feeds* life, and life must be fed before it is refined. As scissors will cut paper but not stone, postmodernism can cut politics but cannot dent literary appeal.

What Plato and postmodernism both hold against literature is its power to teach readers how to love an imperfect world. Plato and postmodernists want to improve the world, but they both make the fundamental mistake of thinking that they can improve the world by discrediting it, or even savaging it, rather than loving it. Improving the world by loving it to health rather than criticizing it to death is a lot like raising children to bring out the best in them rather than the worst. The relationship between love, criticism, and loving criticism is extremely complicated. Advocating a stance of love toward the world is neither new nor a panacea. Genuine love is neither the saccharine emotionalism of Broadway musicals nor the unconditional acceptance of self-help books. Uncritical love is of little value. We have all seen more than enough of new-age sappiness, flower-child naïveté, and willful blindness to palpable evils, but the fact remains that criticism unleavened by love can turn into something much more dangerous than sappiness or naïveté. Criticism unleavened by love too easily turns into cold, self-righteous, dictatorial rejection. All loving parents sometimes need to criticize their children—they may even need to punish them from time to time—but no loving parent wholly *rejects* a child outright. Loving parents may reject certain kinds of behavior, but not the whole person. The leavening of love is the best guarantee that parental criticism will nourish rather than poison. Highly judgmental parents whose only method of improving their children is to pound them with loveless and relentless criticism not only damage their children but almost certainly defeat their own aims of improvement.

So it is with our criticism of the world, of society, of politics, of power relationships, and of literature. Because the world is reborn with each new generation, all of us are in a real and important sense the world's "parents"; we are responsible for tending the world, improving its weaknesses, developing its strengths, and preparing its future. We are, in short, responsible for loving the world as well as improving it, or, rather, we are responsible for improving it by loving it *at the same time* as we criticize it. Postmodernism has in general been too intent on punishing society, especially Western society, for the sins of the past without accepting a proper responsibility for creating an improved future by administering correction informed with love. Plato and postmodernists both fail to realize that greater and more lasting improvement will come from loving the world than from rejecting it outright, like Plato, for whom, in the end, only the Forms and nature, not human beings, really matter; or from being implacably angry at it, like many postmodernists, who have no charity for the failures and partial successes of past reformers. But charity is indispensable, even for angry reformers. Loving the world does not mean going easy on stupidity, self-interest, or hypocrisy, but it does mean being

humble even in the midst of self-righteous indignation, and it also means loving the world in spite of its imperfections.

A better model for us in our discipline than either Plato or Derrida is Chaucer. No one could accuse Chaucer of not seeing the evils of his day, but his generous humanity, his charity, and his love of the world not because of but in spite of its imperfections is a model that we professionals who teach literature and criticism could profitably adopt. Chaucer is not a Pollyanna or a Pangloss, nor does he pull Pilate's trick of washing his hands, but neither does Chaucer teach us to hate the world. Chaucer simply employs a richer set of resources for improving it than do such critics as Plato, Voltaire, Derrida, or most postmodernists. Chaucer relies on critical intelligence, but he also relies on love: love of the world despite its limitations and love of his fellows despite their failures. In the end, I remain convinced that love *and* criticism are much more powerful influences for improvement than criticism alone.

My argument is not that English as a discipline has the power *automatically* to improve either students or the world. Studying literature and criticism does not automatically improve anyone's reasoning, aesthetic sense, or moral agency. Studying literature does not automatically make the world more civilized or sane or spiritual or democratic or tolerant of diversity. Traditional humanists from the Renaissance to the present have long been culpable for claiming naïvely that literature *does* work these improvements automatically, as if literature were a magical panacea. But the weakness of the traditional humanists' arguments is its overstatement of a fundamental truth, not the weakness of being completely wrong-headed. The problem is in claiming that literature works its good effects *automatically*, not in claiming that it possesses the power to work good effects. It is still possible to argue that literary study *invites* such improvement, and that as long as literature remains the focus of our disciplinary activity, then English teachers may reinforce literature's invitations with appropriate forms of knowledge and practice that can be life-forming and life-changing. The nature of literature's invitations to improvement can be brought into greater focus by contrasting those invitations with the coercive prescriptions of postmodern cultural criticism which, despite its relativistic notion of truth, brooks no diversity of views about its own social and political priorities.

Literature does indeed express points of view, and literature is no more able to look at the world from a 360-degree angle than any other human enterprise, but it is worth recalling that both when it is "wrong" and when it is "right" in its basic underlying values, literature can only *invite* assent—it cannot use the specialist's status to compel assent—and literature invites criticism and dialogue as readily as it invites assent. Literature's openness to critical discussion of its moral values and intellectual framework is seldom mirrored in works of literary theory and philosophy,

which generally attempt to forestall criticism as much as possible by seeming to appear as conclusive and irrefutable as possible.

In any event, insofar as English deals primarily in literary study, my argument is simply that English as a discipline has distinctive contributions to make to students' development both as individuals and as social agents, and that identifying the nature of those contributions will help us see the common mission of departments of English even when that mission is practiced in widely divergent circumstances. The six unifying contributions to student development as I see them are the following.

SIX CONTRIBUTIONS TO STUDENT DEVELOPMENT MADE BY ENGLISH AS A DISCIPLINE

1. The **literary content** of English contributes to students' intellectual development by giving them the ways and means of delving into the importance of story, and, through story, of having vicarious experiences of the human condition far vaster than any of them could ever acquire on the basis of luck and first-hand encounters. One of the indispensable aids to mature development is gradually acquiring kinds of knowledge that go beyond first-hand experience. We must learn, for example, that the lives of people we will never meet count in the same way our own lives count. With a richness and vividness beyond anyone's personal experience, literature offers us an education in human types, in human motives and feelings, in human longings, fulfillments, and despairs. If some calamity were suddenly to deprive us of the recollection of every fictional character and event that we now have stored in our heads, we would suffer not only a great reduction in our knowledge of the human condition and of the world, but also a vast diminishment of our sense of self, since everyone's self develops to a great extent through the negotiations we begin conducting with fictional characters in childhood and continue conducting all the remainder of our lives. That story-telling is a universal feature of all human cultures implies that fiction's supplements to first-hand experience constitute an *indispensable* component of the education we all require about the means and ends of human life.

2. **Cognitive skills** that support the critical reading of texts, the precise use of language, and the creation of sound arguments are not the exclusive property of the discipline of English, of course, but arguably such cognitive skills as analyzing, synthesizing, speaking, listening, writing, reading, evaluating, and appreciating are more consistently and comprehensively addressed by disciplinary studies in English than anywhere else. Cognitive skills developed in the course of literary studies spread yeast-like into other areas of intellectual activity. English professionals train themselves and their students to develop an expert's sensitivity to the argumentative, affective, expressive, aesthetic, and rhetorical practices of both spoken and

written language. Such training constitutes a powerful form of intellectual development that is generally useful and transportable to a vast number of activities in a complex and literate culture. Learning to think the thoughts, construct the arguments, and use the vocabulary of literary characters constitutes a vast exercise of cognitive complexity unobtainable in any other way to the degree that it is obtained through literary experience.

3. Aesthetic sensitivity trains us to recognize and respond to art's dimension of mystery. By "dimension of mystery" I am referring to neither transcendence nor religion, but to the suggestiveness, emotiveness, and inexhaustible power that language can acquire when it is used as art. No interpretive strategy of any particular kind ever *fully* explains the entire range of responses elicited by certain works of art in language: their emotional appeal, their joyous enchantment, their intellectual and affective richness, their resonant suggestiveness, or their mobilizing power. I call this the dimension of mystery simply because the power of such effects always lies beyond full explanation. However, this impossible-to-explain power is both easily and universally experienced, like the power of love. No one can fully explain the causes that make us fall in love or even explain fully how love works, but everyone knows what loving someone else feels like. The discipline of English not only validates this kind of sensitivity and responsiveness but helps students develop these capacities and gives them a language for talking about such experience, for analyzing it, and for sharing it with others.

4. Intra- and intercultural awareness is developed and enriched by studies in English which, thanks again to postmodernists, are no longer devoted so single-mindedly to the classics of Western literature as they once were. Interdisciplinary and nonwestern studies have made English a powerful discipline of cultural awareness. English majors today learn about the experience, feelings, attitudes, history, and humanity of those social groups formerly ostracized or marginalized both in our own society and in others. Along with other disciplines, our own actively seeks to make the Other—those persons whose gender, race, ethnicity, class, culture, and so on are markedly different from the reader's—an object of respect and inclusiveness. In the words of Gregory Jay, "the current relationship of academic knowledge to political power can be understood, in some decisive ways, in terms of a *struggle for representation*. . . . [I]t includes struggles over the theory of representation as well as over the actual and cultural politics of representation" (10). A special feature of the awareness of others as represented in literature is its concreteness and particularity. Reading literary representations of the Other provides the most comprehensive understanding of the daily and life-forming experiences of Others. Abstract accounts of the Other such as those in government reports and demographic statistics have their place and their usefulness, but nothing presents the life, feelings, and comprehensive experience of the Other so compellingly and holistically as literary

accounts. Just think of the difference, for example, between the innumerable reports on race relations that appear and reappear in the *New York Times*, in sociological studies, and in government documents as compared to the particularity and vividness of reading such novels as *The Invisible Man* and *Beloved*. English is the most assiduously attentive of all disciplines to this kind of history and content.

5. Ethical sensitivity consists of two abilities. One is the ability to regulate conduct according to some principle of *the right thing*, however that may be construed by the individual. The other is the ability to *deliberate* about moral and ethical issues both in one's own head and in dialogue with other people. In literary study, students in English encounter gripping, detailed, and concrete accounts of individuals who face choices about *the right thing* to do. Because these accounts mirror the circumstances and choices that readers themselves face in everyday life, they can learn from them how to see themselves more objectively, more comparatively. Issues of private conscience and public policy, relations between spouses and among family members, issues of conduct within professions and on the job, questions of religion and morality and principle, ways of spending money and seeking entertainment, attitudes about sexual conduct and power relations between the genders: all of these issues, crucial to the quality and texture of everyday life for all of us, are given the kind of representation in literature that invites readers both to identify with and simultaneously to distance themselves from what is represented. As readers identify with literary figures, or as writers identify with what Booth and Gregory in the *Harper & Row Rhetoric* call "the voice of the opposition" (60, 87–88), they gain a sense of what ethical choices exist in the world and what choices other people both similar to themselves and different from them make. As readers distance themselves from literary representations, they gain an ability to make comparisons that clarify the choices of their own lives. In addition, literary study makes students, like all readers, participants in literary characters' ethical *deliberations*. Readers track the actual thought processes traced by literary characters who are working to discover the criteria for ethical and moral decisions. This kind of practice does not ensure that readers will always deliberate better about moral and ethical problems in their real lives, but without practice real-life improvement cannot occur. In real life, other people's moral and ethical deliberations are either obscured from our view—we simply have insufficiently direct access to other people's minds—or the deliberations that people make visible and public are so entangled with personal interest, emotional smog, or ideological formulas that the real process of deliberation becomes impossible to track. Sharing the struggles and destinies of fictional characters gives us direct access to other minds and lets us observe others' deliberations while practicing our own—all without the pressure of immediate self-interest. All of us require negotiations

with stories on the road to the development of a self that is capable of making ethical and moral choices.

6. Existential maturity refers to mature views about the human condition. I cannot fully define “maturity” because I am still learning what it consists of. But I do know what maturity is not. It is not self-centeredness, it is not unkindness, it is not pettiness, it is not petulance, it is not callousness to the suffering of others, it is not backbiting or violent competitiveness, it is not mean-spiritedness, it is not dogmatism or fanaticism, it is not a lack of self control, it is not the inability ever to be detached or ironic, it is not the refusal to engage in give-and-take learning from others, and it is not the assumption that what we personally desire and value is what everyone else desires and values. We hold our existential views more as attitudes than as arguments, but they are nevertheless the foundation for our approach to life. Existential views consist of such basic beliefs as whether the universe is open or shut to human effort; our basic confidence or lack of confidence about the existence of God or Truth; our belief in the importance or unimportance of reason and reasonableness; our sense that life is more tragic than hopeful or more hopeful than tragic; our sense that human beings either can or cannot achieve their important goals on their own, and so on. All of these views and attitudes are influenced by the stories we imaginatively ingest. Many of them are learned straight from stories. What the discipline of English offers students is the opportunity not only to take stories in, but to study them in contexts that place a premium on thoughtfulness, analysis, and evaluation. The workings of thought, the responses of heart, and the exertions of judgment—when combined with the rich data of stories themselves—yield the kind of knowledge and exercise that can inform, deepen, and sensitize our existential maturity. From this point of view no one critical approach is necessarily superior or inferior. New historicism, cultural studies, New Criticism, Marxism, Freudianism, and other critical theories all offer equally good invitations for students both to try on and to criticize the different attitudes and views about life that literary characters model for them. As students do this—as they simultaneously try on *and* criticize the existential views of literary characters—they stock their own repertoire of attitudes and views. They stretch their own sense of how life and the universe operate. They also develop their own individual capacities for compassion, irony, involvement, detachment, hope, despair, longing, denial, and love. In the end, mature students become mature adults and citizens with developed and distinctive existential views. Everyone develops such views to some extent merely by living, but what the discipline of English offers is the opportunity to develop a stance that not only studies other stances but that gives the vicarious “feel” of those stances as if they were, temporarily, our own. This practice of taking different stances will assist students’ autonomy by helping them make more self-conscious,

deliberate, and better-informed choices, not only about what they *do* but about what they *want*.

In conclusion, my assumption that the discipline of English can discover a unifying mission in the teaching of literature and criticism lies behind my conviction that any course of study that concentrates on the six aims I have discussed above—literary content, cognitive skills, aesthetic sensitivity, cultural awareness, ethical deliberation, and existential maturity—will find itself not only lucky enough to make a contribution to society and individuals that counts, but also lucky enough to find itself continually renewed and refreshed by inquiries that, because they deal with the means and ends of life itself, can never lose their fascination or importance.

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