

Why Indeed Must Anything Be Left of English Studies?

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What's *Left* of English Studies? Right!

We whisper about English Studies in Canada, as in fast-disappearing Ontario hospital emergency rooms—"Will she make it?" While Higher Education in Canada vies for funding with Canada's defense system and health care system, anemic cousins in the Social Sciences, first cousins in the faculties of Humanities, the Fine Arts, and Culture and Communications, ask with some glimmer of hope, "She won't make it. Will she? Shhhh!"

For our purposes, English Studies means the study of English Literature and Literary Criticism, the stuff that goes on in departments of English. But the history of that stuff has not remained the same. Sir Ifor Evans's *A Short History of English Literature* is in tatters. No self-respecting university library holds a history of literature too far beyond the sweet seventies.

New Criticism may have helped to bury the book of literary history. When New Critics took to pedagogy, strange things happened: poets flourished. Students loved poetry. Professors even more. To be able to walk into a classroom and to begin close reading a poem from no-man's land, just like that, sans history, sans biography, sans sans, was simply

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something else! My department (and probably yours) still has a required course in the close reading of poems. It is good for you.

But that was not why poets in Canada multiplied. In the thirties and the forties, while our universities were mostly oblivious to their existence, English Canadian poets were encouraged by the Canadian Council of Authors through the Alberta Poetry Contest and by the Nova Scotia Centre of the Poetry Society of England through the Nova Scotia Poetry Contest. Our close reading of poems often had no use for anything Canadian in such circumstances, although, from across the border, a William Carlos Williams’s red wheelbarrow against white chickens was obviously too poetic to be ignored. Why “so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow” particularly when it is “glazed with rain /water” only the class (and the poem of course) itself knew. If the pediatrician-poet from New Jersey knew as he waited for a child to die, good for him!

That the piece of art is an autonomous entity may sound like 19th-century aesthetic rhetoric. But we still practice our French. *L’art pour l’art*. One reason we can still say this is because we embrace one thing: “?” A question. A question is an autonomous entity. Unanswered questions are in themselves the answers. There is wisdom in that, dummy! If WWII led to a questioning of tradition, our English department canonized James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot. *Shantih* sans *Om*. Some more questioning after WWII almost spoilt the question-game for us, for we began to get some answers. But at least the answers revealed meaninglessness, nothingness, and postmodernism. It could have been worse, you know?

Meanwhile we came of age. The practice of literary criticism found a new bed-fellow, Theory. The name felt heavy on our tongues at first. Like modest Hindu wives in Madras movies, we refused to utter that name. But then we tried it softly, first in whispers, then louder, louder. We gave lit crit a hasty burial and to our heart’s content ogled at theory’s king-size sprawl.

Philosophers wooed us all over again. In the bitter end, the postman slid the kid-cut diamond ring. Post-structuralism.

Let’s get serious.

- A) That there is nothing outside the text.
- B) That truth is relative.
- C) That everything is constructed.

I do. I do. I do.

The department of English eyed the postman. If the chap were text we could have tried shredding. We’ve handled texts before. They quivered under *our* touch. And we trembled at that very possibility. Instead, the

department flexed its knee before the absolute truth of relativism. We touched each other to confirm our constructedness and learnt to relish the space in-between—the groove, sweat and all.

Neither yes nor no. Neither this nor that. Neither right nor wrong. Our tolerance has grown immensely, into moderation and secularism. Immoderate moderation. Dogmatic secularism. Within such hospitality, anything is welcome, everyone is welcome. Modernism's and postmodernism's records and paintings and films, their new and varied construction companies such as Neo-Marxism, New Historicism, and Cultural Studies, all are welcome. Well! Well! Well!

In the first year undergraduate class, students learn to say, "there is no wrong interpretation" to un-retiring professors who hum and haw. "Right!" Our courses thus metamorphose into post-structuralist dis-courses. Students have begun talking about cars deconstructing in downtown garages. But then, as you know, those are the problematics of student-life these days. What with fee *différance* and all?!

(There's also Showalter's chef's deconstructed dishes.)

"Will she make it?"

The chanting begins, *derridaderridaderridaderridaderrida*....

At the American Academy of Religions' meeting in Toronto, thus spake Derrida to a crowd of five thousand (not including women and children): "I cannot say that I am not an atheist." Figure that out—the syntax. There is indeed nothing outside the text.

Will she. Won't she. Will she. Won't she. Will she. Will she. Game-theory machines buzz in readiness. Women's Studies, Black Studies, Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, all sit in a semi-circle within the department of English, clench fists, promise resistance, then release prematurely. Deconstruct. At the far end they look tolerantly alike, while a wail crescendos in Chinatown (preview—it is about steaming Chinese hoppers):

We could pour our Chinese materials into the hopper, press whatever button was in fashion—"structuralism," "phenomenology," "Marxism," "deconstruction," "Lacan"—and produce the appropriate reading. And we did, once again subsuming Asian literature to presumed theoretical universals.

That's really what the real Pauline Yu writes in the real *Stanford Humanities Review*, Volume 6.1 (1998). Page number ... well, you check out their real website.

Tisk! Tisk!

Meanwhile, increasingly, the English Department Head looks like *his* Faculty Dean who in turn looks like *his* Provost who looks like *his* President who somehow looks like our downtown CEO whose latest hair style and drawl are more Bushian than Chretien. We are still dealing with text: the dollar text. Albeit with values. \$50 million. \$150 million. 100% Canada Blue. Corporations and governments flirt furiously with each other all over again while our CEO-like-administrators mimic the gesture, practice tentative advances, then dejectedly return to cut and restructure, cut and restructure, betting a mushy date in the future.

“She won’t make it. Will she?”

Let’s try again. What is Literature? “Acquaintance with ‘letters’ or books; polite or humane learning; literary culture.” That’s the *Oxford English Dictionary*. My eyes jump the middle phrase—*oui, oui*, acquaintance with letters, books ... literary culture, *oui, oui*.... Eyes return unbelievably—polite or humane learning??? ... polite or humane learning???.... “Now rare and obsolescent.” I hug the compilers in silent gratitude and relax in spite of the unmarked assignments strewn all around me. After all, “The rearing of silkworms; concr., a number of silkworms reared at one time” was also education.

Education means poor kids who keep scalding themselves rearing silkworms and rich adults who keep scolding them wearing silk.

Shhhh!

“We could still use those literary skills. It says so in the Will.”

Furthermore. Paragraph transition. Furthermore, the department of English (in fact the **WHOLE** of the university, I might add) wants students to develop critical-thinking-and-communication-skills. We, they, all want all this done through inquiry-based-learning. Remember “?” It is not what they study. But **HOW** they study! As long as they know to think critically and as long as they have the skills to communicate, in English of course.

Why do they study?

Come on, everybody together: **SO THAT THEY CAN THINK CRITICALLY AND COMMUNICATE TOO!**

Yes. But.... But ... why?

Excuse me? That’s a non-question?

Okay. What will they read?

Listen, you are not wrong. You are *misreading*.

I am Misreading?!

Yes. You are misreading. Butler, Guillory, and Thomas quote Lukács, Adorno, and Brecht and prove that navel-gazing is profoundly political:

“self-referentiality of modernist literature as politically significant ...”
(*What’s Left*).

Steamed hoppers teach critical-thinking-and-communication-skills.
We and they think and communicate steamed hoppers very well.

“We could still use those literary skills ...,” interjects Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht for the four hundred and ninetieth time of the seven-times-seventy times in volume six point one of nineteen ninety eight of the Common Era.

Time’s up!

Who do you think you are? Jesus Christ?

No. I am Misreading ... I mean ... I am Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi.
Beauty is in Truth.

That’s handy! Figure that out!

No, really, you see there’s life and death you see. There’s time and timelessness too. Literature represents the material, the cultural, and the spiritual, i.e., life, you see. So, it goes like this—if everything is text and if everything is relative and if everything is constructed, then, formally speaking, construction companies will do relatively well and the department of English will not.

“She won’t make it.”

No. She’s making it alright for now, better than some sixty years ago when boys from Indo-China chased wives all around the room because the two didn’t know how to make babies. Theoretically, she (no, not the Indo-Chinese wife) is innocently contaminating politics. The axis of evil can tempt you to deconstruct. You can tempt the axis of evil to deconstruct. Same difference.

You are a Right!

That’s Left of English Studies.

That’s radical.

Right is radical.

Alright, what’s the radicalist thing you can say?

There is Absolute Truth. I said it! I said it!

Just like that?!

Yep!

You bore me. Try again.

Why indeed ... ?

Signalling a definitive departure from John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University*, Jürgen Habermas considers “The Idea of the University” in terms other than plain gentility—that of New Conservatism. Habermas

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argues: “in the last analysis it is the communicative forms of scientific and scholarly argumentation that hold university learning processes in their various functions together” (124). If the above skit has invited/interpellated you into practices of that communication within the academy, the following reflection should signify some of the sources. To what end? A modest one. All in all, I want to suggest that English Studies in Canada will have to rethink its *purpose* in order to frame a future within the idea of the university as envisioned, often, in a university’s mission statement.

In *The Death of Literature*, Alvin Kernan concludes by declaring that “[electronic] ‘communications,’ a subject with both practical and theoretical dimensions, and considerable usefulness” (202), will take its place when literature self-destructs. Later, in the Epilogue, he revises his comment to suggest that all is not up if only literature (in the USA) would return to “traditional literary works” (213). This time, his faith in traditional works equals his previous enthusiasm for “communications.” Such a return to traditional works under threat of death is, however, in the historicist readings of Gauri Viswanathan, fraught with a colonial agenda. Further, the revisionist readings of traditional works that are supposed to reveal, if nothing else, the “gaps” according to the postmodernist mode (argued out and despised by Kernan) are increasingly themselves suspect, precisely because of the location of the “revisionists” at the very centre of the imperial. Where the revisionist is seen as the default prerogative of the “minority,” and where the minority practically equals non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-male university scholars or their representatives for whom issues of ability, age, class and education, or in cases of their mutual in-communication, even whiteness, heterosexuality, and gender are tertiary, the chances are high that the discovered and cherished gaps will in turn become locations of postmodern injustice.

Then, are the prospects for English Studies funereal? Will Kernan’s “communications” take over?

Considering that, after the defense industry, the USA’s biggest export product is the entertainment industry, one might speculate that there is some likelihood that communications may dominate the Humanities and the Fine Arts in the USA. However, in the case of Canada, with increasing public awareness of the need for widespread higher education and the pressure on governments and corporations for finance and support, an English Studies in Canada whose core is education and not entertainment, just might have a future.

All the same, American or other incisions into English Studies are always possible. This, however, is not a new situation. F. R. Leavis’s *English*

Literature in Our Time and The University already feared the neutralizing of English Studies before American sorties. His half-formulated remedy was to close the English mind to an “inferior” American culture. This in turn is reminiscent of America’s own Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* in which he, Bloom, decries the openness of both the real and the metaphoric borders of the “American” to others. Gerald Graff in *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* recognizes the nationalistic bias of English Studies (13), but also notes that the contemporary shakiness of nationalism or any other -ism does not necessarily undermine literary studies provided the conflicts are brought inside the program. (Also see Cane 90.) After reading Graff, Bill Readings, in *The University in Ruins*, goes after the model citizen as national anyway and celebrates in post-modernist style “the university in ruins,” a.k.a. the death of culture, a.k.a. the birth of Cultural Studies. Readings’s work led to an interrogative paper by Dominick LaCapra, “The University in Ruins?,” in which he points out that the picture of the current university in ruins presupposes a romanticized unified past university that was not in ruins. He in turn announces a global “critical intellectual citizenship” (54). This paper of course is taken up by Readings’s associate Nicholas Royle who at the end of a volley of deconstructions of LaCapra’s “text” (particularly the “?” that he added in the title of his paper), puts forth the dissensual University of Thought (153) as the endless end. LaCapra responds to this response in a five-page stint which he wittily concludes with: “Yes, yes. Perhaps, perhaps. Amen” (158), challenging, in a way, the usefulness of privileging dissent for dissent’s sake. The debate on historical conditions thus becomes an examination of ideologies and a search for purpose.

Some forty years ago, Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal listed some steps the American departments of Economics could take to ensure they survive 2025. In the millennium, at least some of his advice is relevant for English Studies in Canada. According to Myrdal, the researcher should communicate “broad conclusions” to the general public. To do this, one will have to move away from too much specialization as well as fight traditionalism. The former is important as it stifles imagination. The latter will work only if the researcher is interested in “fundamental assumptions” (107). The researcher will have to shed the “false objectivity” (108) of trying to work without value premises. Techniques and theories will have to stop having an interest in themselves. Instead, they must be submitted to the test of fundamental assumptions. Researchers themselves have to be involved and be in touch with realities they study. And of course, for the research

to actually reach the public, the language will have to be one that can be understood outside the discipline.

Myrdal's call to fight traditionalism (not necessarily traditional texts) is also a challenge to begin to have *interest* in some of the fundamental assumptions. The concept of fundamental assumptions as they pertain to issues of justice and injustice is central to English Studies. Interest in this demands on-going learning, reflection, involvement, and communication. In short, it demands on-going conversion in the scholar as a private and public human person. This is a real experience. It is a process that cannot be faked or simply and smartly deconstructed and left at that. Martha Nussbaum refers to this process using terms such as "compassion" (99) and "empathy" (a key term throughout her book). According to her, literature should concern itself with the "world-citizen" and not with "identity-politics" (111). While making a case for diversity, she denounces antihumanist multiculturalism—a view that "celebrates difference in an uncritical way and denies the very possibility of common interests and understandings, even of dialogue and debate, that take one outside one's own group" (110). Methodologically, dialogue, debate, and understanding require a moving out of the borders of one's specialization; they require interdisciplinarity and imagination.

Moving beyond the borders of one's specialization does not entail generalizing *per se*. Rather, it is a reminder to those researchers who dig the burrow deeper, that fresh air has its uses. It refuses to homogenize the outside in terms of the field of specialization. Arun Mukherjee's "Other worlds, other texts: Teaching Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* to Canadian Students" hits the nail on the head in pointing to issues of homogenized postcolonial readings of a specific otherised work whose specificities are pedagogically and institutionally ignored. Needless to say, the error prevails. To move away from "too much specialization" is to have the opportunity to check where the other disciplines and lives are and to assess the relationship between one's field of specialization and those others. It is a moving inward too—a reflective, often uneasy, (re)learning of one's own field. So, it is not a specializing in generalities.

Myrdal's invocation—to become inward and outward oriented—sits well with English Studies, and not just in Canada. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi's not too widely known interview with Ramchandran, a student of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, highlights the important place this inward-outward orientation had in Gandhi's theorizing of the arts. By recognizing the centrality of the principle of Truth in the human person, and the centrality of the human person in art, Gandhi inverts the aesthetics

of “truth in beauty.” He says he sees and finds “Beauty in Truth and through Truth” (249). Gandhi was responding directly to the Decadents’ version of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s aesthetics. But in doing this he was also privileging a transcendent Truth, over and above Author, Reader and Text (ART). The on-going faith of the artist in the transcendental and in Absolute Truth, even as the artist moved in all sincerity through relative truths, would, according to Gandhi, lead to great art for such art would also serve the least privileged in society. The scholar and teacher of such art, and literature (I add), is also, then, called to a similar vocation. The Gandhian equation has several implications for English Studies, chief of which is the realization that literature is not entirely fictional: that literature has consequences. Today, all this may unleash, if nothing else, a post-structuralist tirade. On the other hand, it may be ignored as a cur not worth the kick.

But the mission statement of several Canadian universities insists on a seeking after truth and an implicit understanding that the various faculties and departments (and therefore English Studies in Canada) will align themselves with the university mission. My own university’s mission statement runs thus:

The University of Calgary is a place of education and scholarly inquiry. Its mission is to seek truth and disseminate knowledge. Our aim is to pursue this mission with integrity for the benefit of the people of Alberta, Canada and the world....

It then is also clear that for English Studies to pursue an inward-outward movement or to seek truth there must be a supportive university along the same lines. The ultimate purpose of this alignment is so that others may be served: the people of Alberta, Canada, and the world.

This communicative aspect of English Studies, in the first instance not for its own survival, but in the service of an outside community, discourages theory for theory’s sake. It calls for comprehensibility. It asks for a change of language, a change of English, one that can be understood by the communities it serves.

Gandhi and Myrdal then, to some degree, answer the question: “What is Left of English Studies?” Their answers also rephrase the question into “Why indeed must anything be left of English Studies?”

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