

WHAT IS ENGLISH?

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I do not intend the title of my address to be a rhetorical question, one which, while intended to provoke your curiosity, has within it the implicit promise that I can and will furnish a satisfactory answer to the query I have raised. The truth of the matter is that I do not have an answer, or, to the extent that I do, not *the* answer. The best that I can do is to share briefly with you some observations and concerns about two areas, literature and composition, of a highly complex field, a field that from its inception has continued to evolve, sometimes, as at present, in rapid and dramatic ways.

The question I have posed is, of course, not novel, echoing as it does the title of Peter Elbow's recent report on the English Coalition Conference held in the summer of 1987, a conference that drew together 60 participants representing both eight professional associations concerned with the content, teaching, and learning of English as well as all instructional levels, elementary through graduate school. But Professor Elbow knows that he, like me, holds no copyright on "What Is English?" for it is, as Arthur Applebee points out in *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English . . .* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1974), a perennial question, one that has been raised consistently in the relatively brief history of the profession we share. Those familiar with Applebee's history of English teaching in this nation and with Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) realize that literature has been a staple in the college curriculum for not much more than a century, while English as a required subject in the high schools dates back less than one hundred years, to 1894, when the Committee of Ten of the NEA recommended that students take English four days a week from the freshman through the senior year, the only subject so honored—or so damned—as to be included all four years. Only the elementary schools can claim to have offered from the outset of the nation's history a curricular core that later came to be identified, at least loosely, with the subject of English: reading,

spelling, writing, and elocution. As Applebee notes, Benjamin Harris' *The New England Primer*, Noah Webster's *Blue-Backed Speller*, and William Holmes McGuffy's readers provided the nation's citizens with a common culture when they had no other upon which to rely (5).

Though a staple of the curriculum, English has been anything but stable during the past century. In my lifetime alone, it has encompassed philology; linguistics, including various systems of grammar: Latinate-based or prescriptive, structural or descriptive, and generative or transformational; newspaper and film study; speech; various aims, modes, and processes for composing; myriad skills attendant to decoding and interpreting texts, to punctuating, and to spelling; usage; semantics, and the various schools thereof; literature: American, English, world in translation; genres or types—short story, novella, novel, biography, autobiography, essay, play, poem, including tropes, metrics, and all the variations from limerick to epic associated with poetry; literary criticism, with its various schools and proponents: formalist, including New; textual; biographical; Marxist; psychological; historical; archetypal; mythic; moral; feminist; structural; and post-structural, including deconstructionism and reader-response or reception aesthetics. As a college student I was trained in biographical and historical criticism; as a high school teacher, I became schooled in New Criticism; as a college professor, I now teach reader-response criticism.

Even before the computer had begun to press for its place in the English curriculum, even before feminists and minorities had begun to champion for greater prominence in literary studies, even before we had rediscovered invention as a multi-faceted critical component of the writing process, the curriculum appeared to be sundering its seams. Over three decades ago, in 1958, representatives from Modern Language Association, National Council of Teachers of English, College English Association, and American Studies held three meetings under the sponsorship of the Ford Foundation to discuss issues in the teaching of English. From those meetings came thirty-five basic issues related to the goals and content of English and to the preparation and certification of its teachers, issues printed in *PMLA*, September Supplement, 1959 (Vol. LXXIV:4, Part 2). As one might guess, issue number one was "What is 'English'?" In response to that query, conferees wrote:

We agree generally that English composition, language, and literature are within our province, but we are uncertain whether our boundaries should include world literature in translation, public speaking, journalism, listening, remedial reading, and general academic orientation. Some of these activities admittedly promote the social development of the individual. But does excessive emphasis on them result in the neglect of that great body of literature which can point the individual's development in more significant directions? (7)

To indicate what kinds of works might be taught from "that great body of literature," those attending the meetings, collectively titled the Conference on Basic Issues in the Teaching of English, presented in the same 1959 *PMLA* supplement an article titled "An Articulated English Program: A Hypothesis to Test." Its authors suggest therein that students in grades 1-3 be introduced "to the folklore, fairy tales, and national legends which provide material for allusion and symbol used by both past and present writers in the great tradition, to whose works [children] will later come" (137). Grades 4-6 are to be those in which the imaginations of children are fed through classical, Nordic, and Biblical stories and myth. In grades 7-9 students' reading "might well consist of poems, stories, and plays in the great tradition, from both past and contemporary writers (always within [students'] capacity for understanding, but offering [them] the pleasures and challenges of stretching [the] mind)." Among works strongly recommended for the junior-high years are the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *Job*, *Ruth*, *Jonah*, chapters from *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Samuel*, *Daniel*, and *Matthew*, "along with some sagas, children's histories of England, and America, and narrative poems of promise" (14). In grades 10-13 students are to widen their reading of poetry and plays, biographies, novels, short stories, essays and criticism, as well as of "more difficult and challenging content." Authors of the article "insist that novels of the following kinds . . . be read":

- Simple narrative (e.g., *Robinson Crusoe*)
- Picaresque novel (*Lazarillo de Tormes*)
- Historical novel (*A Tale of Two Cities*; *The Great Meadow*)
- Novel of manners (*Pride and Prejudice*)
- Bildungsroman (*David Copperfield*; *Jane Eyre*)
- Novel of Ideas (*The Scarlet Letter*; *Arrowsmith*)
- Psychological novel (*The Red Badge of Courage*).

In addition, students should read “a few modern plays (by Galsworthy, O’Neill, Arthur Miller); a Greek tragedy; a comedy and a tragedy by Shakespeare; *The School for Scandal*; Shaw’s *St. Joan*.” They “should know a meditative lyric from a modern poem,” and “have a limited but precise knowledge of prosody.” Finally, they should be introduced to “the whereabouts of classical expressions of ideas that have animated modern literature in Plato, Lucretious, Cicero, Augustine, Dante, and Montaigne [sic].” Authors of this remarkable proposed curriculum of literature for the public schools enthusiastically conclude, “What a foundation for students entering college! And what a challenge to those who are not” (14-15).

Amen at least to the latter statement, the referents for which would most likely have dropped school long before learning that Hester Prynne had won her letter. As for the former, they would have shot up already bountiful sales of Cliff Notes, those Baedekers to untraversed literary lands. Nevertheless, the adumbrated curriculum is one that would win support from numerous latter-day critics of perceived flacidity in literary offerings, persons such as Lynne Cheney, Diane Ravitch, Chester Finn, William Bennett, Alan Bloom, and, I suspect, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., individuals who seem to have little sensitivity to the complexities of contemporary American society and to how those complexities—poverty, child abuse, profound variations in individuals’ aptitudes and interests, ethnic diversity, high divorce rates, single-parent households, double wage-earning parents, values transmitted by electronic media, drugs, gang warfare—all affect classroom learning. Good teachers don’t parsimoniously withhold demanding literature from those capable of appreciating it emotionally and intellectually, of having with it what Louise Rosenblatt calls “a lived-through experience.” But they do resist inflicting it upon students who lack the chronological maturity, the experiential background, and the linguistic resources to comprehend, let alone enjoy, what they are being asked to read. As youngsters none of us perused Pound, Eliot, and Joyce for pleasure. Yet few of us would want to return to the ephemeral literature we found exciting in youth. We grow into, and often out of, our literary loves.

Still, there was a time forty years ago when I, forgetful of my own wayward path into the land of acknowledged literary merit, might have endorsed the recommendations of the 1958 conferees on basic issues, a time when, M. A. and teaching certificate in

hand, I had first set out from the university to teach English in high school. Having taken course work covering individuals, periods and movements—from Chaucer through Browning, Middle Ages through the Victorian Period—I believed English to be that body of literature written by the reputed master poets and prose writers of the language, almost all of whom were males and almost all of whom had been citizens of England, Ireland or Scotland. My graduate courses stopped well short of Yeats, Joyce, Woolf, and Auden; and, aside from an undergraduate survey course spanning from Mayflower to Civil War and a graduate course in the rise of realism in American fiction, I had little knowledge of the literature of this country. The prevailing belief of the faculty at that time was that the mainstream literature of this nation was patently inferior to and derivative from that of England, with the consequence that I and my peers were denied majoring in American literature.

As a beginning teacher, I had, then, no background in adolescent literature, only a passing acquaintance with some of the major white writers indigenous to the United States, and no knowledge whatsoever of its major minority authors. Only much later, and principally through independent study, would I become familiar with authors whose work is now widely represented in anthologies: Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Americo Paredes, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Diana Chang, N. Scott Momaday, Imamu Amiri Baraka, Leslie Marmon Silko, Black Elk, Simon Ortiz, Toni Morrison, Lawson Fusao Inada, Tomas Rivera, Lorraine Hansberry, Maxine Hong Kingston, Nikki Giovanni—to name but a handful.

If my alma mater seemed provincial in its inattentiveness to the contributions that minority authors had made to American literature, that provinciality was widely shared. One cannot find in “An Articulated Curriculum: A Hypothesis to Test” any citation to a work written by a minority author. In 1972, less than two decades ago, NCTE published *Searching for America*, the report of its Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English. In it, members of the task force note that

. . . *American Poetry*, edited by Gay Wilson Allen, et al., published in 1965 consists of over 1200 pages of poetry by 50 poets from the colonial period to the present . . . but does not contain a single poem by a black author.

An Anthology of Famous American Short Stories, edited by Angus Burrell and Bennett Cerf, requiring 1,340 pages, contains 73 stories and includes not a single story by a black writer.

American Poets from the Puritans to the Present, a critical treatise by Hyatt H. Waggoner, mentions only one black writer in its 700-plus pages, and this only indirectly when the author refers to William S. Braithwaite as a quadroon.

Masters of American Literature, edited by Leon Edel, et al., contains short stories, excerpts from novels, essays, a play, poems, and speeches, from Edward Taylor to William Faulkner, but it contains not a line by a black writer. (66-67)

. . . in the number of texts examined . . . the Mexican-American and the Chicano writer are conspicuously absent. It should be pointed out emphatically that this absence, this blatant omission, is not because there aren't Chicano writers or haven't been Mexican-American writers in the past, but because of ignorance about Mexican-American literature and its writers, and also because of a thoroughly ethnocentric, literary point of view that has placed Anglo-American writers at the top of the literary heap in the United States. (79)

What was true for blacks and Chicanos was equally true for Asian-Americans and Native-Americans: authors or characters were not to be found in the anthologies except in the most token or, in the case of characters, stereotypic ways. And though female authors were anthologized, their work represented only a small fraction of that being offered. Of the ten novels cited in "An Articulated Curriculum: A Hypothesis to Test," only two, *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*, were written by women. A study conducted in 1963 by Scarvia B. Anderson of Educational Testing Service (ETS) and published in 1964 under the title *Between the Grimms and "The Group": Literature in American High Schools* (Princeton: ETS) revealed that of the nine book-length works taught in at least 30 percent of the public schools, the 11 works taught in at least 30 percent of the Catholic schools, and the 15 works taught in at least 30 percent of the private schools, none had been written by nonwhites and only two, *Silas Marner* and *Pride and Prejudice*, by women. A more recent survey, conducted by Arthur Applebee in 1988 for the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, found that of the ten most popular book-length works now being taught in the secondary schools, none had been written

by a minority author and only one, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by a woman (*A Study of Book-Length Works Taught in High School English Courses*, Albany, New York: State University of New York, 1989). Nevertheless, one can find in current anthologies in both the secondary schools and colleges far wider representation of minority and female writers than was true two decades ago, particularly among shorter selections—poems, short stories, essays, and excerpts from biographies and autobiographies.

Though offerings in literature have expanded rather widely in recent years to accommodate the legitimate complaints of women and minorities, though even my alma mater's staid English department now offers such courses as "Minority Voices in Contemporary American Literature," "Forms of Afro-American Literature," "American Indian Mythology, Legend and Lore," and "The Works of Virginia Woolf," campuses across the nation have nonetheless been agitated of late by students' demands for separate departments or at least programs in African-American Studies, Hispanic Studies, Asian-American Studies, Native-American Studies, and Feminist Studies. The result is that traditional scholars, who fear Balkanization of the literary curriculum, elevation of the second rate, and further fading of the dream of shared cultural literacy, find themselves at the barricade, with (my apologies to Tennyson)

Canon to right of them,
Canon to left of them,
Canon in front of them,
Volley[ing] and thunder[ing] . . .

Whether schools ever provided a core of literature germane to all the nation's citizens is moot. Certainly there are those who believe that the literature traditionally offered has disseminated, at best, an elitist culture, one that has assured the hegemony of wealthy white males at the expense of non-whites, females, and working-class poor. That argument aside, one would have to be naive indeed to believe that, to the extent that it does exist, the literary canon is stable, discrete, and appealing enough to induce citizens to share a select body of works whose content and style are of enduring and widely recognized cultural value.

First of all, agreements about literary worth are hard to come by. The term *literature* itself begs definition, as Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) and Alvin Kernan in *The Death of Literature* (New Haven:

Yale University Press, 1990) skillfully and repeatedly demonstrate. Further, interpretation of whatever we call literature is indeterminate, varying widely from reader to reader and often, depending upon time and circumstance, within the same reader. The more complex the work, the more variant become its possible interpretations. Finally, literature, however we define it, constantly accretes. Three decades ago at an Asilomar conference on language arts, Professor Wallace Stegner of Stanford observed that there are only two disciplines whose subject matter must be accumulative: history and literature. He then noted that because of William Harvey, physicians are no longer obliged to study Galen's theory of the humors; because of Copernicus, astronomers do not have to learn Ptolemaic cosmology; but because Shakespeare followed Chaucer, he did not render his predecessor obsolete. The farther time extends, the more literary works—or, if one prefers, texts—that are published, the more difficult it becomes to agree on a literary core for the curriculum.

Already literature anthologies for high school and college students are hernia-inducing, but demands continue for more selections, not fewer. If agreement is to come on what should be taught to whom and to what ends, that agreement, I believe, must take place at local rather than state or national levels, for only at that level can teachers take into full account the problems, interests, and abilities of the students they daily face. Determining the content of the curriculum, not just literature but all its components, requires on-going dialogue, dialogue that most heavily involves teachers but that also accommodates the concerns and desires of students, parents, and administrators. Time and commitment for such dialogue are imperative, for as Rexford Brown implies in *Schools of Thought* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), the intellectual tone of a school, the level of learning in which students are engaged, can be inferred from the talk that goes on among teachers in workroom and cafeteria. If that talk is about ideas, about *whys* and not just *whats*, chances are high that important education is taking place in classrooms.

I realize that I have spent considerable time, perhaps an inordinate amount, discussing the place that literature has traditionally occupied in the English curriculum. I have done so out of the realization that for at least the last three decades literature has played a dominant role in the high-school English curriculum and, with the increasing influence of the whole-language movement,

is becoming ever more prominent in the elementary-school curriculum. In 1968 James Squire and Roger Applebee reported in *High School English Instruction Today* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts) that English teachers in 138 high schools noted for the excellence of their programs spent 52 percent of observed class time on literature and only 16 percent on writing instruction, with other time being devoted to language study, reading instruction, media, speech, and other activities. When Arthur Applebee conducted a similar study in 1989, *The Teaching of Literature in Programs with Reputations for Excellence in English* (Albany: State University of New York), he found that teachers estimate that they give approximately 50 percent of their classroom time to literature and 28 percent to writing instruction, with additional time being given to language study (10 percent), speech (9 percent) and other activities (4 percent). Teachers surveyed also report that 75 percent of the writing that their students do is writing about literature.

The increased emphasis on writing instruction between 1968 and 1989 should come as no surprise. Workshops sponsored by the National Writing Project; the spate of textbooks, research reports, and theoretical works on composing that have appeared in the past two decades; federal largess in funding the National Center for Writing—all have raised teachers' and the public's consciousness of how important writing is to cognitive development and to the play of human imagination.

Just as literature should never have been separated from reading instruction, literature study should never have been cleaved from composing, as it was in the Nineteenth Century when universities relegated composition, which ostensibly appealed to the faculty of understanding, to a role in English departments subsidiary to that of literature, poetry reputedly appealing to the higher faculties of imagination and emotion. Rhetoric, with its emotional appeals to the will, was unfortunately assigned to departments of speech, with the result that the teaching of composition was made virtually synonymous with arid teaching of exposition (James Berlin, *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984, 62-64). Well, we now know better than did our predecessors, at least in progressive public schools, where one can find students composing not just expository essays but myriad literary forms—poems, short stories, letters, diaries, journals, plays, biographies, autobiographies. Further, we

have come to appreciate through the work of numerous scholars the kinship between the processes of reading and writing, the roles that prior knowledge, context, and purpose play in each, the ways that each elicits from us comparable recursive activities as we tentatively formulate and revise meanings, the ways in which we abet retention by writing about what we have read. In an article in the Fall/Winter 1980 issue of *Basic Writing*, (Vol. 3: No. 1), E. D. Hirsch, Jr., pointed out the intrinsic ties between reading and writing by noting that none of us can conceivably write better than we read, for in the act of revising, we are forced to read our own words (42). Good writers are perforce good readers, though lack of practice and insufficient command of skills may leave good readers as inept writers, an argument for carefully attending to both these language activities in the classroom.

Despite widespread current attacks on print literature from various theoretical camps, I cannot envision its quick demise. Print literature, particularly fiction, allows us to enter unobtrusively into the lives of others, to explore the hidden recesses of characters' minds, to become cognizant of their unarticulated thoughts and feelings, not only to perceive with our inner eye what persons are doing but to comprehend, often better than they, why they are doing it. By allowing us to penetrate surface behaviors, to participate in the interior emotional lives of others, print literature helps confirm our own humanity: it reassures us that we are not alone in the universe, that though each of us is unique, we share with others the wellsprings of human action, to be found in such feelings as loneliness, anger, fear, and hate as well as in the more noble sentiments of compassion, altruism, courage, and love.

By comparison, TV and film most often seem flat to me, able to render well characters' overt behavior but inadequately their covert motivation, unable to put viewers inside humans' psyches except through such clumsily contrived devices as overvoices or soliloquies directly into camera. Nevertheless, I am willing to concede that to the degree that we have a common culture in this country, it is one being communicated by television and film. In its issue of October 11, 1968, *Life* magazine estimated that for every book the average college student reads for pleasure, he or she views 20 films, a figure probably made highly conservative by the present ready availability of movie channels and the seeming ubiquity of VCRs. When I was with the National Council of Teachers of English, I soon realized that wherever I traveled in

the nation, I could share my viewing experiences much more readily than I could my reading experiences. *Cheers*, *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown*, *Terminator 2 . . .*, and *Home Alone* provide common denominator for talk in ways that *The Mill on the Floss* and *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* do not. In conceding that most of this is rather low-level chitchat, I do not intend to demean film or television, both powerful and often artistic media, both capable of wooing to them far larger audiences for *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Hamlet*, *Wuthering Heights*, or the Civil War than print has been able to attract. If anything, I would argue that we must make room in an already crowded curriculum for non-print as well as print media, that we must do more than cap the reading of a novel or play with a fast run-through of the film. Rather, we must help students become sophisticated viewers as well as readers, ones capable of appreciating how print and camera render reality in different ways, how each is capable of influencing an audience for base as well as elevated ends.

I say this because I am particularly aware of the consistent findings in polls conducted by the Roper Organization for the Television Information Office, findings that reveal that most citizens rely on television as the main source of their news, that they find the televised account of an event more credible than the newspaper or magazine account of that same event, that forced to choose, they would elect television over either newspapers or periodicals as their single source of information. By the time of graduation from high school most students will have been taught that words can alter the truth, that print can lie, but few will have learned that camera angles can distort and editorialize events, that tape can be dubbed and spliced, that seeing should not inexorably lead to believing. Clearly, as teachers we have a moral obligation to help the gullible become less so by filling a major gap in their education.

Whether we will fill that gap in the decades ahead as teachers of English is problematic. We may become, as Terry Eagleton would have us be, teachers of rhetoric, subjecting all forms of discourse in the culture, popular as well as artistic, to rigorous rhetorical analysis; we may become, as Alvin Kernan suggests, teachers of communication, concerned with whatever forms, print or non-print, versions of information and reality are assembled and transmitted; we may become teachers of semiotics, the theory of signs and symbols, teaching students how diverse artifacts within

a culture, from its clothing to its jewelry, from its films to its novels, communicate that culture's values.

Whatever we and the subject we now profess become in the years ahead, rest assured that print literature will continue to have some place in the curriculum, that students will still need to learn how to compose their thoughts and emotions in a variety of written modes for a variety of different purposes, and that, as is true today, we will have more than God's plenty for us to know and to do.

So it has been, so it now is, so it shall be, profession without end, amen.