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The Decline and Fall of Literature

By [Andrew Delbanco](#)

BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE

In Plato's Cave

by Alvin Kernan

Yale University Press, 309 pp., \$25.00

The Death of Literature

by Alvin Kernan

Yale University Press, 230 pp., \$15.00 (paper)

Literature: An Embattled Profession

by Carl Woodring

Columbia University Press, 220 pp., \$29.50

What's Happened to the Humanities?

edited by Alvin Kernan

Princeton University Press, 267 pp., \$29.95

The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline

by Robert Scholes

Yale University Press, 203 pp., \$25.00

The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies

by Michael Bérubé

New York University Press, 259 pp., \$17.95 (paper)

Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities

by John M. Ellis

Yale University Press, 262 pp., \$27.50

A couple of years ago, in an article explaining how funds for faculty positions are allocated in American universities, the provost of the University of California at Berkeley offered some frank advice to department chairs, whose job partly consists of lobbying for a share of the budget. "On every campus," she wrote, "there is one department whose name need only be mentioned to make people laugh; you don't want that department to be yours."^[1] The provost, Carol Christ (who retains her faculty position as a literature professor), does not name the offender—but everyone knows that if you want to locate the laughingstock on your local campus these days, your best bet is to stop by the English department.

The laughter, moreover, is not confined to campuses. It has become a holiday ritual for *The*

New York Times to run a derisory article in deadpan *Times* style about the annual convention of the Modern Language Association, where thousands of English professors assemble just before the new year. Lately it has become impossible to say with confidence whether such topics as "Eat Me; Captain Cook and the Ingestion of the Other" or "The Semiotics of Sinatra" are parodies of what goes on there or serious presentations by credentialed scholars.^[2]

At one recent English lecture, the speaker discussed a pornographic "performance artist" who, for a small surcharge to the price of admission to her stage show, distributes flashlights to anyone in the audience wishing to give her a speculum exam. By looking down at the mirror at just the right angle, she is able, she says, to see her own cervix reflected in the pupil of the beholder, and thereby (according to the lecturer) to fulfill the old Romantic dream of eradicating the distinction between perceiver and perceived. The lecturer had a winning phrase—"the invaginated eyeball"—for this accomplishment. During the discussion that followed, a consensus emerged that, in light of the optical trick, standard accounts (Erwin Panofsky's was mentioned) of perspective as a constitutive element in Western visual consciousness need to be revised.

As English departments have become places where mass culture—movies, television, music videos, along with advertising, cartoons, pornography, and performance art—is studied side by side with literary classics, it has not been easy for the old-style department to adjust. The novelist Richard Russo captures the mood of such a department trying to come to terms with a (rather tame) new appointee named Campbell Wheemer, who "wore what remained of his thinning hair in a ponytail secured by a rubber band," and who

startled his colleagues by announcing at the first department gathering of the year that he had no interest in literature per se. Feminist critical theory and image-oriented culture were his particular academic interests. He taped television sitcoms and introduced them into the curriculum in place of phallocentric, symbol-oriented texts (books). His students were not permitted to write. Their semester projects were to be done with video cameras and handed in on cassette. In department meetings, whenever a masculine pronoun was used, Campbell Wheemer corrected the speaker, saying, "Or she." ...Lately, everyone in the department had come to refer to him as Orshee.^[3]

The only implausible note in this vignette is the cordiality with which it ends.

Bickering, backbiting, generational rift are not new, but something else is new. Outside the university, one hears a growing outcry of "Enough!" (it takes many forms, including a number of Bad Writing contests, in which English professors are routinely awarded top prizes), while within the field, the current president of the Modern Language Association, Edward Said, has caused a stir by lamenting the "disappearance of literature itself from the...curriculum" and denouncing the "fragmented, jargonized subjects" that have replaced it.^[4]

One can discern the new feeling in the titles of several recent books whose tone is somewhere between a coroner's report and an elegy. Alvin Kernan, formerly provost at Yale and dean of the graduate school at Princeton, and now senior adviser on the humanities to the Mellon Foundation, initiated the *in memoriam* theme with *The Death of Literature* (1990). More recently, the theme appears in, among other books, *Literature Lost* (1997), by John Ellis, a

scholar of German literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz, *The Rise and Fall of English* (1998), by Robert Scholes, a professor at Brown, and it is reprised in Kernan's new book, a memoir of his fifty years in the academy, *In Plato's Cave*.^[5] On the same obituary note, a front-page story in the *Times* reported a few months ago that the English Department at Duke University—the "cutting-edge" department of the Eighties—had collapsed into factions so bitter that the dean placed it under the direction of a botanist whose field of expertise is, appropriately, plant respiration.

What does it all mean? Should the teaching of English be given a decent burial, or is there life in it yet?

1.

Literature in English has been a respectable university subject for barely a century. The scholar of Scottish and English ballads Francis James Child was appointed to the first chair in English at Harvard in 1876; the English honors degree was not established at Oxford until 1894. Almost from the start there have been periodic announcements from a distinguished roster of Jeremiahs that liberal education, with literary studies at its core, is decadent or dying. In 1925, John Jay Chapman looked at American higher education and, finding Greek and Latin classics on the wane, proclaimed "the disappearance of the educated man." Some fifty years later, not long before he died, Lionel Trilling gave a paper on "The Uncertain Future of the Humanistic Educational Ideal"—a title that understated the pessimism of the paper itself.^[6]

Yet during this half-century of putative decline, the study of literature—measured by the attraction it held for students and young faculty—was booming. During the unprecedented expansion of American higher education in the 1960s, in my own department at Columbia, scores of candidates registered each year for the MA degree, and many went on for the Ph.D. Today, all this has changed. The number of Ph.D.s in English awarded annually in the United States peaked in the mid-1970s at nearly 1,400. Since then, the number has dropped by almost one third—a trend consistent with the contraction of the humanities (literature, language, philosophy, music, and art) as a whole, which fell as a percentage of all Ph.D.s from 13.8 percent to 9.1 percent between 1966 and 1993. In the same period, the percentage represented by the humanities of all BAs granted in the United States dropped from 20.7 percent to 12.7 percent.^[7]

Even if one takes consumer appeal as a measure of value (as Chapman and Trilling did not), student attrition does not necessarily amount to an indictment of the field for some intellectual failing. For one thing, the decline in humanities students relative to other fields reflects the fact that the postwar expansion took place especially in the previously underemphasized fields of science and technology. With increased access to college for many students whose social and economic circumstances would once have excluded them, vocational fields such as business, economics, engineering, and, most recently, computer programming have also burgeoned. Moreover, as the historian Lynn Hunt points out, the average age of American undergraduates has risen sharply in recent years, and older students tend to pursue subjects that have practical value for finding a job.

But it is also true that many "traditional" students (the new term for those who used to be

referred to as "college age") are turning away from literature in particular and from the humanities in general already in high school. Among the millions who take the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT), usually given in the tenth grade, only 9 percent indicate interest in the humanities. Even at so-called elite institutions, humanities enrollments have leveled off or fallen (at Harvard College, 25 percent of the students—and only 15 percent of male students—now concentrate in humanistic subjects).^[8] Many who once might have taken time for reading and contemplation now tend to regard college, in Trilling's prescient phrase, "as a process of accreditation, with an economic/social end in view." It is always dispiriting to find young people feeling they have no time to "waste"; and even at Ivy League schools, where financial aid, though imperiled, remains relatively generous, it is common nowadays to hear students say they must find a way to finish in three years in order to limit their indebtedness and to get on to "real work."

There is a correlation, if not a clear sequence of cause and effect, between the decline in student numbers and the dwindling job market for new professors of literature and other humanistic subjects. Since science and other competing fields now command a much greater share of university resources than they once did, humanities professors who earned their degrees during the expansion of the 1960s are not being replaced at the same pace at which they are retiring. Therefore, at a time when the United States has historically low unemployment rates, "the ratio of dignified academic jobs to the number of doctoral graduates" in the humanities, according to Robert Weisbuch, president of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and formerly chair of the English department at the University of Michigan, "is perhaps one to three even when we count optimistically."

One reflection of what Kernan calls the "catastrophically depressed" job market was the recent graduate student strike at Yale over wages and benefits (in which humanities students played a large part). Administrators and senior faculty tend to regard the teaching duties of graduate students as part of their apprenticeship for the career for which they are being trained. But students facing a dead end at the conclusion of their studies may reasonably regard their duties as exploitation by a university that gets high-quality labor from them at low cost, only to replace them with a new supply of temporary workers in the persons of the next crop of Ph.D. candidates.^[9]

While in the last ten years or so, the number of English Ph.D.s has remained relatively constant or even risen slightly, some English departments (including Yale's) have responded conscientiously to the employment crisis by reducing the number of incoming candidates for the Ph.D. to as few as ten—which then creates a shortage of teachers to staff composition and introductory courses. Completing the circle, the shortfall is made up by hiring, at minimal wages and with no benefits at all, part-time faculty drawn from the growing pool of unemployed Ph.D.s who were "apprentices" just a few years before.

These unsustainable trends tell us nothing about what actually goes on in the classroom, where, if there is a certain amount of gynocology-as-epistemology nonsense, there is still plenty of intelligence and passion on the part of both full-time and part-time faculty. But these developments do help to explain the fractious mood of the contemporary English department. Literature is a field whose constituency and resources are shrinking while its subject is expanding. Even as English loses what budget-conscious deans like to call "market share," it

has become routine to find notices in the department advertising lectures on such topics as the evolution of Batman from comic-book crusader to camp TV star to macho movie hero alongside posters for a Shakespeare conference.

This turn to "cultural studies," which has not been much deterred by any fear of trivialization or dilettantism, means that English studies now venture with callow confidence into the interpretation of visual, legal, and even scientific "texts."^[10] As the young critic Michael Bérubé reports, "English has become an intellectual locus where people can study the text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from a Christian perspective, the text of the O.J. trial from a Foucauldian perspective, and the text of the Treaty of Versailles from a Marxist perspective."

Even conservative departments are beginning to take account—belatedly—of the global literature of decolonization, which followed the Second World War. As a subject for study English now properly comprises more than the literature of England, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Authors from the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean, and South Africa now fall under the purview of faculty already hard-pressed to staff courses on Milton, Spenser, or Donne. Establishing a curriculum has become an exercise in triage by which some writers can be saved only if others are sacrificed—one reason why each new appointment promised by the provost or dean provokes a fight among the beneficiaries.

What is at stake in these squabbles? For one thing, a college education has become very expensive—about \$140,000 for four years at a first-rank private university. And since a rise in purchase price tends to raise consumers' demand for some testimony to the worth of what they are buying, old questions are being asked on and off campus with new urgency. Does an English BA still have value? What does it matter if the action shifts to cultural studies and English becomes, as Harold Bloom (among others) sorrowfully predicts, a minor department harboring a few aesthetes who like to read what Scholes calls "a foreign literature [written] in a (relatively) familiar language"?

One response to such questions has always been a calculated insouciance. The academy, some say, has never mattered much to the fate of literature, and literature may even be endangered when professors get their hands on it. This idea has a good pedigree ("We see literature best from the midst of wild nature," Emerson wrote in his essay "Circles," "or from the din of affairs") but today this would be a glib answer, and an anachronistic one, in view of what Kernan calls "the waning of book culture" even within the university.

Kernan's work is an elegy for the "single figure, sitting alone, silently reading to himself or herself." He takes no comfort from the reading groups and chain-store coffee bars that are giving old books new life—many of whose members and patrons seem to be adults whose taste in reading was stimulated in college at least a generation ago. And he overlooks the sales boost that follows every TV or movie "remake" of a play by Shakespeare or a novel by Dickens or James. (It is a conspicuous irony that while English departments turn toward popular culture, popular culture is turning toward classic writers.) But he is fundamentally right that fewer of today's booted-up, logged-in, on-line college students are having an igniting experience with books. And professors of English have never done a poorer job than they are doing now at answering the question, "So what?"

2.

An answer that leads back, I believe, to the core of a literary education is to be found in an entry Emerson made in his journal 165 years ago. "The whole secret of the teacher's force," he wrote, "lies in the conviction that men are convertible. And they are. They want awakening." Having left the ministry two years before, Emerson was still in the process of transforming himself from a preacher into a lecturer, and of altering the form of his writing from the sermon to the essay. But his motive for speaking and writing had not changed with the shedding of his frock. Like every great teacher, he was in the business of trying to "get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep."

None of us who has ever been a student can fail to read this passage without remembering some teacher by whom we were startled out of complacency about our own ignorance. For this to take place, the student must be open to it, and the teacher must overcome the incremental fatigue of repetitive work and somehow remain a *professor* in the religious sense of that word—ardent, exemplary, even fanatic.

Literary studies, in fact, have their roots in religion. Trilling understood this when he remarked, in his gloomy essay about the future of the humanities, that "the educated person" had traditionally been conceived as

an initiate who began as a postulant, passed to a higher level of experience, and became worthy of admission into the company of those who are thought to have transcended the mental darkness and inertia in which they were previously immersed.

Such a view of education as illumination and deliverance following what Trilling called "exigent experience" is entirely Emersonian. ^[11] It has little to do with the positivist idea of education to which the modern research university is chiefly devoted—learning "how to extend, even by minute accretions, the realm of knowledge." ^[12] This corporate notion of knowledge as a growing sum of discoveries no longer in need of rediscovery once they are recorded, and transmittable to those whose ambition it is to add to them, is a great achievement of our civilization. But except in a very limited sense, it is not the kind of knowledge that is at stake in a literary education.

Those who brought English literature into the university late in the nineteenth century knew this. And lest they forget, colleagues in established fields were glad to remind them—as did the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, in a broadside published in 1887 in the *London Times*:

There are many things fit for a man's personal study, which are not fit for University examinations. One of these is "literature."...[We are told] that it "cultivates the taste, educates the sympathies, enlarges the mind." Excellent results against which no one has a word to say. Only we cannot examine in tastes and sympathies.

English, in other words, amounted to nothing more than "chatter about Shelley."

One way some English professors defended themselves against this sort of attack was to stick to the business of establishing dates, allusions, and the historically contingent meanings of

words—the sort of foundational work that had previously been done for the Greek and Roman classics. In the stringent form of philology, this was the tactic by which English teachers managed to make room for themselves in the university in the first place—though the status of philology as empirical knowledge was never entirely secure. Kernan tells how, as a student at Oxford after the war, he was trying without much success to master the history of the English language until his tutor took pity on him and advised, "When you hit a word in a text that you cannot identify, simply correlate it with some modern word that it sounds like and then invent a bridge between them. Most of the examiners will be suspicious, but may consider, so imprecise is linguistic science, your little word history an interesting possibility."

Since then, literary "science" has yielded many genuine discoveries. Biographical scholars have uncovered salient facts about authors' lives; textual scholars have hunted down corruptions introduced by copyists, printers, or intrusive editors into what authors originally wrote. But for most students, especially undergraduates, the appeal of English has never had much to do with its scholarly objectives. Students who turn with real engagement to English do so almost always because they have had the mysterious and irreducibly private experience—or at least some intimation of it—of receiving from a work of literature "an untranslatable order of impressions" that has led to "consummate moments" in which thought and feeling are fused and lifted to a new intensity. These ecstatic phrases describing aesthetic experience come from Walter Pater, who was writing in Oxford in the 1870s—at just that "point of English history," as T.S. Eliot put it, marked by "the repudiation of revealed religion by men of culture." This was also the moment when English first entered the university as a subject of formal study.

The idea that reading can be a revelatory experience stretches back in its specifically Christian form at least to Saint Augustine, who wrote of being "dissociated from myself"^[13] until he heard a child's voice beckoning him to open the Gospels, "repeating over and over, 'Pick up and read, pick up and read.'"

A millennium and a half later, Matthew Arnold wrote in the same spirit when he defined culture (in a phrase that has often been misconstrued and misappropriated) as the "pursuit of total perfection by means of getting to know...the best which has been thought and said in the world, and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits." For Augustine, "the best which has been thought and said" was to be found exclusively in scripture; for Arnold, it was more various—scattered throughout all works capable of leading readers beyond the "bounded intellectual horizon within which we have long lived."

Like any religion that has been codified and institutionalized, this "religion of culture" (as Arnold's detractors called it) has been susceptible to deformations—proselytizing the impressionable young, degenerating into idolatry, clinging to rituals long after the spirit from which they originally arose is attenuated or gone. Yet something like faith in the transforming power of literature is surely requisite for the teacher who would teach with passion and conviction. It is a faith expressed uncommonly well by Emerson some thirty years before Arnold:

Literature is a point outside of our hodiernal [present-day] circle through which a new one may be described. The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it.

This large assertion links aesthetic response with moral (or what Kernan prefers to call "existential") knowledge, and even with the imperative to take reformist action in the world. For Arnold, culture had nothing to do with the motive "to plume" oneself with "a smattering of Greek and Latin," or to wear one's education as a "badge" of "social distinction." To acquire culture was, instead, to become aware of the past and restless with complacencies of the present, and to be stirred by the "aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it." As long as teachers of literature acknowledged their responsibility for transmitting culture in this sense, they held a dignified position in the university. In fact, since the decline of classics and theology, and the takeover of philosophy departments by technical analytic philosophers, they have stood, along with those historians who continue to practice narrative and cultural history in the grand nineteenth-century style, as the last caretakers of the Arnoldian tradition.

Today, when students are more and more focused, as Scholes puts it, on acquiring "technological truth in the form of engineering, computer science, biotechnology, and applications of physics and chemistry," the university's obligation is surely larger than ever to see that students encounter works of literature in which the human "truths" they bring with them to college are questioned and tested. There is no inviolable reason why this sort of education must proceed chiefly in the English department; and to some extent it has already migrated at some institutions into "core curricula" where the Jewish and Christian Bibles and Greek and Roman classics are read in translation (inevitably at some loss), along with later works of philosophy and history. But for the foreseeable future, the English department will remain a main source and training ground for most college teachers of literature, and the condition of the English department is a pretty reliable measure of the state of liberal education in general.

Kernan gives a moving account of how he taught Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (in Richmond Lattimore's translation) in a "Great Books" course at Yale—with a teaching method that runs close to the pulpit technique of "opening" the text and that accords with Arnold's idea of what culture should mean:

I analyzed the trilogy in a formalist manner, mainly following a scenic and imagery pattern in which again and again light and hope flare up, only to expire in darkness and despair, and then to be relit once more. A play that begins in darkness lit by the small, distant fire announcing the fall of Troy ends at last in the full blaze of noon of the Athenian theater and the Athenian court. I did not hesitate to point out to the students that the struggle for justice that is Aeschylus's subject is still played out every day in our courts, where rational laws free murderers because there is a shred of reasonable doubt, and the families of the murdered cry out and demand what we have come to call "victim's rights." This, I told them, or most often tried to extract from them in discussion, without apology for connecting literature with life, is where the real power of great literature lies, in its ability to portray feelingly and convincingly critical human concerns in terms that do not scant its full human reality and its desperate importance to our lives. All the aesthetic formalist aspects of the play—Aeschylus's extraordinarily tangled language, the profusion of imagery, the repetitive hope-failure pattern of the plot, the intense and brooding characters—were, in my opinion, ultimately in the

service of the play's presentation of the human need for full justice and explanation of why it is so difficult to achieve. I was not arguing that the play has a "message," that it carries some social argument for a better court system; rather, it offers a universal description of where we humans live always in relation to justice. This is, I suppose, a view of the purpose of art that would most readily be called "moral," and I would not repudiate the term entirely, but I think that "existential" would be a far better term, for "moral" carries with it the suggestion of some rigid prescription, of a limited and coercive point of view, which is not the way great literature works.

This way of teaching may strike the resolute historical scholar as too "presentist," and the present-minded theorist as too "universalist." But these objections will never vitiate the gratitude of a student who has been touched by such a teacher.

The sad news is that teachers of literature have lost faith in their subject and in themselves. "We are in trouble," as Scholes puts it, "precisely because we have allowed ourselves to be persuaded that we cannot make truth claims but must go on 'professing' just the same." But what kind of dubious "truth-claims" does literature make? Literature does not embody, as both outraged conservatives and radical debunkers would have it, putatively eternal values that its professors are sworn to defend. It does not transmit moral certainty so much as record moral conflict. Its only unchanging "truth-claim" is that experience demands self-questioning.

"Literature," as Carl Woodring puts it with typical understatement, "is useful for a skeptical conduct of life." If the English department becomes permanently marginal, students will have been cheated and the university left without a moral center. This is why the state of literary studies is a problem not just for literature professors, but for everyone.^[14]

3.

One irony in the marginalizing of English studies is that they enjoyed their greatest prestige in the secular academy when they held most closely to the tradition of scriptural exegesis from which they derive. In the immediate postwar decades, when English departments were flourishing, intellectual energy was concentrated in something called the New Criticism—a reductive term often taken today to designate a narrow formalism and stipulative method. In fact, many who accepted the rubric were engaged in a broad resistance to what one of their leaders, Cleanth Brooks, called the "quixotic desire" of humanists "to be objective and 'scientific.'" The New Criticism was still, and unashamedly, driven by an essentially religious impulse—as expressed in the quasi-theological title of Brooks's notable essay "The Heresy of Paraphrase," which argued that trying to distill "'a prose-sense' of a poem" as if one could build "a rack on which the stuff of the poem is hung" amounts to a kind of blasphemy. As his Yale colleague W.K. Wimsatt explained in another famous essay, "The Intentional Fallacy," the poet—the mind behind the creation—remains an inscrutable creator whose intention can never be fully known, but in whose handiwork one may glimpse something of the sublime idea to which the poem gives form.

At the height of the New Criticism in the 1940s and 1950s, some of its most respected practitioners taught in small colleges, and even those in the research universities, such as

Reuben Brower at Harvard (to which he had come from Amherst), were primarily undergraduate teachers. Under their spell, the classroom became something like a Quaker meeting, not so much a place of compulsory recitation as of open invitation for students to contribute toward the goal of building, collectively, new insights into the work under discussion.

Ultimately, the New Criticism was a mood more than a methodology. And it was, not incidentally, the last time that practicing poets—T.S. Eliot, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, and, later, Richard Wilbur, among others—had a significant impact on academic criticism. Pater's belief that "lyrical poetry...is...the highest and most complete form of poetry" had been transmitted by Eliot to the New Critics, who regarded a work of literature—which they described in language close to that with which Augustine had described creation itself—as "a pattern of resolutions and balances and harmonizations, developed through a temporal scheme."

Contemplating these patterns and harmonies under the guidance of a good teacher could (and can) be a wonderfully vertiginous experience. But in acknowledging what every true writer knows—that words are never quite governable by the will of the author—the New Critics were planting seeds of future trouble for English studies. Paul de Man, who introduced the deconstructionist theory of Jacques Derrida to American readers after the New Criticism had become a received orthodoxy, detected in the New Critics a "foreknowledge" of what he called, borrowing a phrase from the Swiss critic Georges Poulet, "hermeneutic circularity."

There is a hint of what he meant in Kernan's charming story about a retirement party for one of the elder Yale eminences he had known only slightly during his graduate years. "You were never my student, I believe," said the older man. "No," Kernan concurred, to which came back the indecipherable reply, "A pity." Was there a compliment in that answer? Or was it a dig? How could one know if either was intended? A pity for whom—teacher or student?

Writers and good critics have always reveled in language play; but in the 1970s academic criticism got terribly solemn about it. Suddenly, the professor's "a pity" was no longer a joke; it had become a "multivalent," "indeterminate," and "undecidable" "speech act" construed differently by different "interpretive communities," all of which was evidence that the "referentiality" of language to anything outside itself is an illusion, and that sequences of words to which we assign meaning are actually "gaps" filled by the "subjectivity" of the reader. Captain Ahab's second mate on the Pequod, Mr. Stubb, had pretty much summed it up a long time before: "Book!...you'll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts."

Deconstruction fit the darkening mood of the Seventies, when all claims to timeless or universal truth became suspect as self-serving deceptions perpetrated by wielders of power. It was an effort, as we used to say, to heighten the contradictions and raise them to the level of consciousness. Along with its offshoot, "reader-response" criticism, it was a mischievously extreme skepticism that regarded all meanings and judgments as contingent on the "subject-position" of the reader. Deconstructionists rejected the idea that a work of the imagination manifests any "presence" (a rubric under which they gathered such notions as meaning, beauty, and authorship), and, with the atheist zeal of erstwhile believers, they substituted terms like "aporia" and "absence."

One of the implications was that literature was no more or less worthy of study than any other semiotic system; fashion, gestures, sports could now serve as a "text" for the game of interpretation. But this view soon lost its playfulness, and turned into the dogma that literature, like any constructed system of meaning, must be assessed in relation to this or that "identity" (race, class, gender, etc.) to the exclusion of every other point of view. Here began in earnest the fragmentation of literary studies that is so evident today—and that has left a legacy of acrimony, and of intellectual and professional fatigue.

Deconstruction can also be seen as simply another phase in the continuing effort by literary studies to get respect from "hard" disciplines by deploying a specialized vocabulary of its own. Long before its rise, in an essay entitled "The Meaning of a Literary Idea" (1949), Trilling had remarked that "people will eventually be unable to say, 'They fell in love and married,' let alone understand the language of *Romeo and Juliet*, but will as a matter of course say, 'Their libidinal impulses being reciprocal, they activated their individual erotic drives and integrated them within the same frame of reference.'" Trilling's parody of the Freud fad of his day was intended to illustrate how "ideas tend to deteriorate into ideology," and by ideology he meant

the habit or ritual of showing respect for certain formulas to which, for various reasons having to do with emotional safety, we have very strong ties of whose meaning and consequences in actuality we have no clear understanding.

Today's rendition, to which the requisite dash of Gramsci and sprinkle of Foucault (among the biggest post-deconstruction influences on literary studies) are added, would go something like this: "Privileging each other as objects of heterosexual desire, they signified their withdrawal from the sexual marketplace by valorizing the marital contract as an instrument of bourgeois hegemony." Who knows what tomorrow will bring?

In view of the French provenance of much recent literary theory, one might simply say of English studies, *plus ça change...*, and leave it at that. There is much to be said against indulging in golden-ageism whereby the acerbities and absurdities of the past disappear into the glow of nostalgia. Carl Woodring is particularly good at documenting how the old guard has always moaned that literary studies are going to hell. And Kernan, whose memoir revisits old Yale quarrels that still rankle after forty years, devotes pages to settling old scores, and to ungenerous portraits of rivals living and dead. Yet they are both right to claim that literary studies are riven today more deeply than ever before, and that they have fallen into the grip of a peculiarly repellent jargon—repellent in the literal sense of pushing readers away. The question remains, Why has this happened? Was there some singular force behind the multiple events that Scholes sums up as the "fall of English"?

4.

In *Literature Lost*, the shrillest of recent books on the crisis, John Ellis blames the whole mess on the dynamics of professionalization—on, that is, the pressure to publish something, *anything*, that is novel or startling or upon which a reputation can be built. The publish-or-perish desperation has only increased as the readership for what is published declines. [\[15\]](#) "This is rather like the Irish elk syndrome," Ellis says, by which "competition for dominance within the species led to the evolution of ever larger antlers, but the larger antlers caused the

species as a whole to become dysfunctional and dragged it down."

The analogy has a certain force, but it encourages too internal a view of the situation. In fact, universities had little control—perhaps institutions never have much—over what was happening around and to them in the tumultuous years between, say, the publication of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and the appearance of de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1971). The surge in student enrollments reflected the size and prosperity of a new generation (today's tenured faculty) that had grown up in the blue glow of television, which, in a fierce chapter, Kernan calls "the technological actualization of Plato's cave, a mass medium controlled by advertising and playing therefore to a mass market, throwing on the screen almost totally false images of the world." The Pill turned sexual prudence into prudery. Postwar promises of technological utopia (labor-saving machines would liberate people for untrammelled creativity and leisure) turned into intimations of dystopia (Strontium 90, Thalidomide, the Bomb). The new political engagement, inspired by the civil rights movement and a terrible war, collapsed into cynical indifference after a series of assassinations—and, it should be said, after the threat of the draft was lifted.

The best we usually manage in trying to grasp even a few of these profound changes is to lump them together under the term "the Sixties." Perhaps one might venture the generalization that the two great themes of the time were retreat from the wicked world into pastoral pleasures and distrust of all claims of truth as ruses performed on behalf of power. Inside the academy, the first theme (they were roughly sequential) found prophetic expression in a best-selling book by Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (1959), which called half-whimsically for a culture free of repression, and the second expressed itself, rather grimly, in what came to be known as the "hermeneutics of suspicion."

Much of what happened in "the Sixties" was salutary. Critics became more alert—though not more so than pioneer scholars such as William Charvat and Ian Watt had been in the 1950s—to how writers, especially novelists, could be understood as producers of consumer commodities. The question of literary reputation (the much-fought-over "canon") was forced open in a healthy way. Criticism took on new excitement as the critic's debilitating worry about being a literary parasite was swept away in a surge of confidence—or of self-love, depending on how you looked at it. And perhaps most important, the Arnoldian idea of culture, which had become something of an academic piety, was challenged by a more-or-less Marxian idea of culture as false consciousness—as a constellation of unexamined assumptions, attitudes, institutions, that has the power to suppress one's awareness of one's "true" condition. Culture began to be understood as a force that can limit the imagination as well as enlarge it.

All this took place against the background of a booming economy (driven, in an often overlooked irony, by cold war military spending) that expanded university faculties, and, since compulsory retirement was still in force, made them younger. Even at places like Yale, the students whom this renovated faculty taught were no longer exclusively white, male, and prosperous. Until passage of the GI Bill (which had enabled Kernan to go to Williams in the Forties), Ivy League and other established Eastern colleges had been essentially finishing schools for children with old money; but now, applicants from public schools competed with candidates from the prep or "feeder" schools, the number of minority students began to rise, and the percentage of women in historically male institutions (Yale first admitted women in 1969) quickly reached 50 percent.

And so the relation between students and teachers had to change. The Yale at which Kernan first taught in 1954 had been a training ground for future "old boys," where students regarded professors as "servants hired by their fathers at low wages to give them culture" and professors returned the sentiment with the condescension of the intelligentsia for the leisured class. Fifteen or twenty years later, professors no longer barked or glared, and were less inclined to try (it could never have been easy) to make their students feel unworthy before the literary treasures they were offering them.^[16]

The process of changing the assumptions of literary studies began in the late 1950s under the name "structuralism"—a technique by which culture was analyzed as a collection of codes and rituals denoting tribal boundaries that protect against transgression by a threatening "other." Words like "high" and "low" (along with other evaluative terms such as "primitive" and "advanced," or "savage" and "civilized") acquired obligatory quotation marks, and literature, in effect, became a branch of anthropology.^[17] By the 1970s, leading figures in literary studies were calling into question even the residual aspiration to positive knowledge that structuralism expressed. "A literary text," de Man wrote in 1970, is so dependent on changing interpretation that it "is not a phenomenal event that can be granted any form of positive existence, whether as a fact of nature or as an act of the mind." Nor could literature any longer be understood, on the model of religion, as a body of inspired writings with discernible meanings. "It leads," de Man declared, "to no transcendental perception, intuition, or knowledge...." The very subject—literature—that gave the English department its claim on the university was now revealed to be a mystifying name assigned to texts so designated by those with the power to impose their tastes on impressionable readers.

Under these "postmodern" conditions, what was left for English professors to believe and do? The point of writing and teaching was now less to illuminate literary works than to mount a performance in which the critic, not the instigating work, was the main player. The idea of rightness or wrongness in any reading ("there is no room," de Man wrote, "for...notions of accuracy and identity in the shifting world of interpretation") was rendered incoherent.

Yet even as English departments absorbed and institutionalized the so-called counterculture in the forms of structuralism, deconstruction, and their various descendants, they lost none of their eagerness for their subject to be recognized as a mainstream discipline in universities driven by the quest for new, empirically testable, knowledge. The result has been a growing contradiction between the evaluative mechanisms of the modern university (peer review of research proposals, assessment of the impact of research results) and the increasingly subjective, personal, even confessional writing that has become a standard part of "scholarly" discourse in literary studies.

English has become, as Louis Menand says (following a suggestion from David Bromwich) in *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, "'hard' and ironic at the same time," emphasizing "theoretical rigor and simultaneously debunk[ing] all claims to objective knowledge"—an inner conflict that has proven costly to its standing in the modern university. It will never be able to submit its hypotheses to the scientific test of replicable results, and it can never be evaluated according to some ratio between the cost of the service it provides and the market value of its results. It has reached a point of diminishing returns in proportion to the scale of its operation: the texts of the major writers have been established; the facts of their biographies are mostly

known. And while old works will always attract new interpretations from new readers, and the canon will continue to expand with the discovery of overlooked writers—a process that has accelerated enormously over the last twenty-five years with the entrance into the profession of women and minorities—the growth of English departments at anything like its former pace cannot be justified on the grounds that literary "research" continues to produce invaluable new knowledge.

Yet even as they lose respect in-side universities, English departments are still refurbishing themselves as factories of theories and subfields. All of these—feminist, gay and lesbian, and postcolonial studies, the New Historicism (which acquired its name when Stephen Greenblatt used a phrase that proved infectious, but that he never intended as a big claim for novelty), and, most recently, "eco-criticism"—are yielding some work that illuminates aspects of literature to which previous critics had been closed and that merits the Arnoldian description, "fresh and free thought." But much of the new theory is tendentious or obscure, and the imperative to make one's mark as a theoretical innovator has created what John Guillory calls a "feedback loop": "The more time devoted...to...graduate teaching or research, the more competition for the rewards of promotion and tenure... [and] the more pressure to withdraw from labor-intensive lower-division teaching."¹⁸ Despite the job shortage, the prestige of graduate teaching rises at the expense of undergraduate teaching, and English departments thereby cut themselves off from the best reason for their continued existence: eager undergraduate readers.

That the English department is a weak force in the politics of the university is nothing new. It will probably survive, if only because it still provides the service of teaching expository writing to undergraduates.¹⁹ A more serious threat comes from outside. This threat stands in the background of all these books (only Kernan brings it forward), and, now that all the shouting about the culture wars seems to be dying down, it takes the form, beyond the walls of the self-absorbed academy, of earned indifference. Disputes that once seemed vitally important have settled into a family quarrel about which no one outside the household any longer cares.

Meanwhile, inside, the bickering goes on. When Kernan complains, for instance, about "the violence and even hatred with which the old literature was deconstructed by those who earn their living teaching and writing about it," younger critics reject the charge as slander—as does Bérubé, who begins his book with the remarkable protestation, "I love literature. I really do." Woodring describes the situation as "a seriocomic scenario in which sodden firefighters spray water on each other while the house burns down." If the humanities are in danger of becoming a sideshow in the university, it is we the humanists who, more than demographic changes or the general cultural shift toward science, are endangering ourselves.

5.

The field of English has become, to use a term given currency twenty-five years ago by the redoubtable Stanley Fish, a "self-consuming artifact." On the one hand, it has lost the capacity to put forward persuasive judgments; on the other hand, it is stuffed with dogma and dogmatists. It has paid overdue attention to minority writers, but, as Lynn Hunt notes in her essay in *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, it (along with the humanities in general) has failed to attract many minority students. It regards the idea of progress as a pernicious myth,

but never have there been so many critics so sure that they represent so much progress over their predecessors. It distrusts science, but it yearns to be scientific—as attested by the notorious recent "Sokal hoax," in which a physicist submitted a deliberately fraudulent article full of pseudoscientific gibberish to a leading cultural-studies journal, which promptly published it. It denounces the mass media for pandering to the public with pitches and slogans, but it cannot get enough of mass culture. The louder it cries about the high political stakes in its own squabbles, the less connection it maintains to anything resembling real politics. And by failing to promote literature as a means by which students may become aware of their unexamined assumptions and glimpse worlds different from their own, the self-consciously radical English department has become a force for conservatism.

English, in short, has come to reflect some of the worst aspects of our culture: obsessing about sex, posturing about real social inequities while leaving them unredressed, and participating with gusto in the love/hate cult of celebrities. (At the conventions these days, resentment is palpable, as celebrities hold forth before colleagues frightened about their chances of getting a job or keeping the one they have.) English today exhibits the contradictory attributes of a religion in its late phase—a certain desperation to attract converts, combined with an evident lack of convinced belief in its own scriptures and traditions.

In what is perhaps the largest irony of all, the teaching of English has been penetrated, even saturated, by the market mentality it decries. The theory factory (yesterday's theory is deficient, today's is new and improved) has become expert in planned obsolescence. And though English departments are losing the competition for students, they have not resisted the consumerism of the contemporary university, where student-satisfaction surveys drive grade inflation (it is the rare student whose satisfaction is immune to a low grade), and the high enrollments on which departments depend for lobbying power with the administration can sometimes be propped up by turning education into entertainment.

Forty-three years ago, the great intellectual historian Perry Miller wrote, in his characteristically self-dramatizing way, that he "tremble[d] for the future of our civilization when the methods of Madison Avenue penetrate the scholar's sanctuary."^[20] Anyone who has read a David Lodge novel knows that the scholar's "sanctuary" moved some time ago out of the library into the airport, the convention hotel, and the TV talk show. And despite scoldings from deans about "faculty flight" from the classroom, too many universities like it this way, since the public visibility of the faculty is a selling point in the ever-increasing competition for the bright and ambitious students who will determine the future solvency of the institution.

In the end, the surrender by English departments to principles of the marketplace will not save them—even if one computes salvation in numerable units like faculty positions and student enrollments. Until now, in the internal university struggle for resources that the Berkeley provost describes, professors of literature have found support from alumni (some of whose names are attached to libraries, lecture series, and endowed professorships) who think back gratefully to teachers who introduced them to genuine literary experience. Future benefactions will depend on whether today's and tomorrow's students leave college with the same feeling of indebtedness.

If I have been harsh in some of what I have said, I have tried not to be disloyal to a profession I love. It is important to remember, as Kernan stresses, that the image of the overpaid,

underworked English professor is almost always cruelly wrong. "Large numbers of intelligent, highly educated young people," Kernan writes, "who had expected to become scholars and professors of literature at distinguished universities [have] slipped back down the social scale to being poorly paid writing masters at marginal colleges with minimal admission and retention standards." English is still a field full of dedicated teacher-scholars, and one of the results of the decline in jobs is that excellent people are more widely distributed among institutions of all ranks than ever before.

But full-scale revival will come only when English professors recommit themselves to slaking the human craving for contact with works of art that somehow register one's own longings and yet exceed what one has been able to articulate by and for oneself. This is among the indispensable experiences of the fulfilled life, and the English department will survive—if on a smaller scale than before—only if it continues to coax and prod students toward it.

While one stands and waits, there are hopeful signs. One hears talk of "defending the literary," and of the return of beauty as a legitimate subject for analysis and appreciation. The flight from undergraduate teaching seems to be slowing, and the best graduate students are restless with today's tired formulas.^[21] Many of them, if they find a job, may yet be destined to fit Max Weber's description of the true professor (this is Emerson's evangelist groomed to German standards) who hates cant and leads "students to recognize 'inconvenient' facts—I mean inconvenient for their party opinions."^[22] Now and then, on good days, I think I hear a distant drumbeat heralding the return of such evangelical teachers. They cannot come back soon enough.

Notes

[1] Carol Christ, "Retaining Faculty Lines," *Profession 1997* (Modern Language Association, 1997), p. 55.

[2] The first (fictional) title is from James Hynes, *Publish and Perish: Three Tales of Tenure and Terror* (Picador, 1997), p. 51; the second is from the program of the 1996 MLA convention.

[3] Richard Russo, *Straight Man* (Random House, 1997), p. 15.

[4] Edward Said, "Restoring Intellectual Coherence," in *MLANewsletter*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 1999), p. 3.

[5] These books are by older scholars. But, as Thomas Nagel has noted (*The New Republic*, October 12, 1998, p. 34), there has been "a shift in the climate of opinion," including that of younger critics, "so that insiders with doubts about the intelligibility of all this 'theory' are no longer reluctant to voice them." An early sign of the change was Frank Lentricchia's renunciation of theory in *Lingua Franca* (September/October 1996, p. 64): "Tell me your theory and I'll tell you in advance what you'll say about any work of literature, especially those you haven't read." More recently, leading critics (in this case, Margery Sabin, in *Raritan*, Summer 1999, p. 140), have begun to lament that "it has become so much easier to identify what is *not* literary study, and what are not humanistic values, than to say what they are or ought to be."

[6] Chapman, "The Disappearance of the Educated Man," *Vanity Fair*, July 1925; Trilling, *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 160-176.

[7] These figures come from a 1999 MLA report on "Ph.D. placement and production," and from the statistical appendix to *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, Kernan's collection of essays by twelve leading scholars. In the same period, English majors actually show a modest increase as a percentage of the declining portion of humanities degrees—in part attributable, as Frank Kermode remarks (*What's Happened*, p. 169), to the influx "of women students still denied the early training required for the sciences," and, it might be surmised, to the fact that as American students became overwhelmingly monolingual, classics and foreign literature departments shriveled into tiny enclaves—leaving English on most campuses as the only literary game in town. To put the statistics in perspective, it should be noted that in many universities, history is classified as a social science.

[8] Lynn Hunt, "Tradition Confronts Change: The Place of the Humanities in the University," in *The Humanist on Campus: Continuity and Change*, American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper No. 44, p. 8; James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield, "The Market-Model University," *Harvard Magazine* (May-June 1998), pp. 50, 54. One striking sign of these trends is that in the latest version of the widely derided, but widely read, university rankings published annually by *US News and World Report*, the California Institute of Technology has risen to first place (dislodging Harvard) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to third. While the criteria for these rankings are highly suspect, they both reflect and influence public opinion.

[9] Robert Weisbuch, "The Humanist on Campus—and Off-Kilter," in *The Humanist on Campus*, p. 1; on the Yale strike, see Andrew Hacker, "Who's Sticking to the Union?" *The New York Review*, February 18, 1999, pp. 45-48.

[10] Lynn Hunt makes the interesting observation that "cultural studies...may end up providing deans with a convenient method for amalgamating humanities departments under one roof and reducing their faculty size." ("Democracy and Decline: The Consequences of Demographic Change in the Humanities," in *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, p. 28.)

[11] Trilling, it should be said, preferred to associate himself with the German Romantic conception of disciplined self-creation (*Bildung*), rather than with the American version of ecstatic self-discovery.

[12] The phrase comes from Daniel Coit Gilman (quoted in Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 57), the first president of the first genuine research university in the United States, Johns Hopkins.

[13] This is Henry Chadwick's recent translation of Augustine's phrase "*Ideo... dissipabar a me ipso*."

[14] Some educational leaders are showing concern that this may be happening, including the president of Harvard, Neil Rudenstine, whose degree is in English, and who devoted his 1998 commencement address to a defense of the humanities as "essential ...to any serious definition of education"—a statement that, by the felt need to make it, constitutes a noteworthy alarm.

Harvard, after all, was founded by clergymen who "dread[ed] to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches, when our present Ministers shall lie in the Dust."

[15] A number of university presses have recently cut back on titles in literary theory for lack of a market.

[16] This was also the time when some universities introduced the "pass/fail" option (virtually no one failed) and others eliminated grades altogether. Kernan reports that at Princeton, the faculty passed a rule that course offerings proposed by professors required formal approval by graduate students in the relevant department before they could be taught.

[17] One reason structuralism caught on was that it was assimilable to the existing traditions of philology (which studied languages as linked systems), the New Criticism (with its veneration of intricate verbal structures), and the "myth" criticism that had arisen earlier, particularly among scholars of American literature such as Constance Rourke, Henry Nash Smith, and Leslie Fiedler, many of whom were studying pulp novels and mass-market romances well before scholars of English literature ventured much beyond the certified classics.

[18] Guillory, quoted in the *Final Report of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment* (December 1997), p. 13.

[19] Teaching composition has long been regarded as a kind of internship obligation for graduate students and junior professors. As Scholes puts it, "The one thing...English *must* do... is to lead students to a position of justified confidence in their own competence as textual consumers and their own eloquence as producers of texts." It is a symptom of the current state of English that Scholes cannot bring himself to say, "to teach students to read and write."

[20] Perry Miller, "The Plight of the Lone Wolf," *American Scholar*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Autumn 1956), p. 448. In the interest of full disclosure, it should be said that the belligerently highbrow Miller was disappointed when *The New Yorker* declined to serialize his book *The Raven and the Whale*.

[21] Stanford has recently established a policy granting new faculty positions to departments whose senior faculty regularly teach freshmen and sophomore seminars, and Harvard has announced the endowment of twenty-five professorial chairs carrying summer funding and periodic research leaves (in addition to normal sabbatical leaves) for faculty who emphasize undergraduate teaching.

[22] Weber provides the elegiac theme for David Bromwich's essay, "Scholarship as Social Action," in *What's Happened to the Humanities?*

Letters

April 13, 2000: Michael P. Clark, ['The Decline & Fall of Literature': An Exchange](#)

