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Where Do English Departments Come From?

WILLIAM RILEY PARKER

MY TOPIC-QUESTION—Where do English departments come from?—is not intended to be funny, but my answer may strike you as at least ironic. I shall try to answer with something clearer and more illuminating than “Out of the everywhere into the here.” I shall try, in fact, to be very definite, and I want you to know at the outset my purpose. If this were a sermon instead of a history-lesson, I would take my text from Cicero, who said, you will remember, “Not to know what happened before one was born is always to be a child.” He said this, of course, in Latin, which is the language in which English studies began and, to some extent, long continued, and which is still a language that all serious students of English literature had better know, despite the fact that we are now allowing it to disappear from our public schools. But that is a sermon for another occasion. Cicero’s dictum points up my purpose on this one. Even if history does not truly repeat itself, knowledge of it may, at least sometimes, give current problems a familiar,

less formidable look. Moreover, neglect of experience, personal *or recorded*, condemns us to repeating its follies. To live intellectually only in one’s own time is as provincial and misleading as to live intellectually only in one’s own culture. These truisms, if you will accept as well as forgive them, apply to the history of the teaching of English as much as they apply to the history of other matters. And they apply to the recent as well as the distant past. It can be most useful to know with certainty how raw and how new some of our problems really are. So let us begin with recognition of a simple fact: the teaching of English, as a constituent of college or university education, is only about 100 years old, and *departments* of English are younger still. Let me underline this by defining “English.” A recent dictionary will tell you, not to your great surprise, that it can mean “English language, literature, or composition when a subject of study.” It may surprise you, however, to know that you will *not* find this definition or anything like it in the 1925 Webster’s unabridged dictionary or in the thirteen-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*. Its absence from these is significant. Its absence from the new Random House dictionary is shocking.

Since I am myself an English teacher,

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I cannot resist answering my question about the origins of English teaching, first with a flourish of rhetoric, and finally with what I hope will be a full and clear explication. If I may begin by twisting a tired Shakespearean adage, it is a wise child that knows his own parents. "English" as a recognized academic subject was not self-begotten, nor did it spring fully armed from the forehead of ancient rhetoric. It is a normal and legitimate child. It is not a foundling. Present-day professors and graduate students of English should be more aware, therefore, of its once proud parents, both of whom are still very much alive—though living apart. The child, grown to vigorous manhood, is today somewhat ashamed of both, and sees as little of them as possible. Proud of its own accomplishments, confident in its present prestige, it would like to forget its origins. A little more than fifty years ago, after neglecting its mother for some time, it became alienated from her, and became more than ever its father's son. Then, exactly ten years later, it broke with its father. Since increased maturity and a sense of maturity sometimes carry the promise of reconciliation in such domestic tragedies, there is still the possibility, of course, that the child will some day not only feel proud of its parents but even be willing to learn something from them.

As I have said, English was born about 100 years ago. Its mother, the eldest daughter of Rhetoric, was Oratory—or what we now prefer to call public speaking or, simply, speech. Its father was Philology or what we now call linguistics. Their marriage, as I have suggested, was shortlived, and English is therefore the child of a broken home. This unhappy fact accounts, perhaps, for its early feeling of independence and its later bitterness toward both parents. I date the break with the mother, however, not from the disgraceful affair she had with Elocution, but rather from the founding of the Speech Association of America in 1914,

which brought, as was hoped, the creation of many departments of speech. I date the break with the father, not from his happy marriage to Anthropology, but from the founding of the Linguistic Society of America in 1924, and the developing hostility of literary scholars to non-prescriptive grammar, new terminology, and the rigors of language study. Splinter groups form when their founders feel their interests neglected, and English teachers, absorbed in what they considered more important business, were indeed neglecting speech by 1914 and losing all vital concern with linguistics by 1924.

I might go on to speak of the unfortunate divorce of linguistics and speech, who, in my unromantic opinion, were obviously "meant for each other." Optimists like me can hope for an eventual family reunion, but pessimists will, of course, point out that this is impossible because, with the passage of time, the parents have actually forgotten each other and the child has almost forgotten the parents. Because there is an element of truth in this charge, I choose to begin by telling (or reminding) you of the family history; reconciliation requires *remembrance* along with wisdom and good will.

But now I must drop this domestic metaphor, and turn to the prosaic details of the history of English studies and of the teaching and eventual departmentalization of English language and literature.

To prevent some potential confusion, let us recall that English *studies*—or serious scholarship or criticism devoted to English language or literature—are much older than any *teaching* of English. English studies date from Tudor times, and are a fruit of the English Renaissance and Reformation. Let me hammer this point home with some illustrations; if in every instance I have not yet found the very first example of a now familiar phenomenon of our field, I very much hope that you will correct me. Serious

linguistic scholarship on English begins in the 1560's with the work of Laurence Nowell, John Josselin, William Lambarde, and Archbishop Matthew Parker on Anglo-Saxon. Serious biographical and bibliographical scholarship on English literature begins even earlier, in the 1540's, with the impressive Latin catalogues of John Leland and Bishop John Bale. Important lexicographical scholarship also dates from the sixteenth century, though the first really English dictionary was Robert Cawdrey's, as late as 1604. Unless you choose to begin with Caxton or, perhaps, Polydore Vergil, serious editing of important English authors is inaugurated by Thomas Speght's Chaucer in 1598, which, in a prefatory life, also gives us, to the best of my knowledge, the first separate biography of an English literary figure written because he was a literary figure. Francis Thynne's prompt review of Speght's edition is probably our first example of scholarly reviewing; as you may recall, it greatly influenced Speght's second, revised edition of 1602. The first publication of variant readings of a single work was in 1640, by John Spelman. T. S. Eliot was not the first poet to annotate his own work (in *The Waste Land*, 1922); Thomas Watson did this for his *Hekatompathia* in 1582. Perhaps the first annotation of separate works begins with the notes by "E.K." on Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* of 1579 and John Selden's notes on Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* of 1613. The first whole volume to be devoted to annotation of a single literary work was Patrick Hume's 321 closely printed pages on *Paradise Lost* in 1695. Recognizable criticism of English literature dates from the sixteenth century, and the collection of critical opinion on authors begins with Sir Thomas Pope Blount in 1690 and 1694. Source study of English drama begins with Langbaine in 1691. Perhaps the first truly scholarly biography, with ample footnotes and indication of sources, was Thomas Birch's life of Milton in 1738.

One could easily go on; it is fun to collect "firsts"; but perhaps I have said enough to remind you that there was a considerable and venerable tradition of serious scholarship and criticism on English language and literature long before there was any continuous teaching of these subjects. I have to put it this way, carefully, because Archbishop Ussher and the Spelmans, father and son, tried hard to have it otherwise: a chair of Anglo-Saxon was actually established at Cambridge in the 1640's, but the English civil war and the deaths of both the Spelmans and the first and only holder of the chair, Abraham Wheloc, aborted this experiment, and Cambridge did not have another professor of Anglo-Saxon until 1878, and did not have a professor of English literature until 1911. It is interesting to speculate on what the history of our profession might have been like had the academic study of English actually begun in 1640, two years after Harvard College opened. But Harvard was not to have a professor of English until 1876, when, ironically, it granted its first Ph.D. in English to a man who never entered the teaching profession. Oxford had a professorship of poetry as early as 1708, but this was to mean classical poetry only, until long after the teaching of English literature had otherwise established itself as an academic subject. Even Matthew Arnold, who in 1857 broke all traditions by lecturing in English instead of in Latin, never thought of himself as a professor of English. Oxford did not have a university chair of English literature until 1904. When the Modern Language Association of America was founded in 1883—only eighty-three years ago—twenty leading institutions were represented at the organizational meeting in New York, and at all twenty of these institutions there were only thirty-nine faculty members in English.

I stress these dates in order to remind you that the teaching of English is a Johnny-come-lately—a fact that has some

relevance to any answer given the question "Why can't Johnny read?" Our research and criticism are old; our jobs are new. Our profession as scholars demonstrates richly the lessons learned from four centuries of experience; our profession as teachers is still wrestling strenuously and confusedly with initial problems that mass education has suddenly and greatly aggravated. As scholars we have matured; as teachers we—the same people—are still children in our ignorance or innocence, still fumbling and faddish and lacking well-defined goals. These, I realize, are strong statements, and I mean to explain and support them before I finish. Meanwhile, however, let me say that I *think* I am talking to you about one of the central problems of our profession—and one which, in my experience, is almost never discussed.

When, where, and by whom the formal teaching of English began at any level of education is not, I believe, known, and probably will never be known. From very early times it inevitably formed some part of the "petties" (or primary, elementary education as conducted in the parish, or under private tutors, or however). Exactly when it extended upward into secondary education, in private day or boarding schools, is only approximately known; "grammar schools" were originally designed to teach *Latin* grammar; but in the second half of the eighteenth century a slowly increasing number of such schools in English were professing what was called an "English education," in contrast to the usual classical education preparatory to a university, as their aim. This term is now potentially misleading; it embraced considerably more than English language, literature, or composition, but it normally included composition or "rhetoric" in the mother tongue. On this side of the Atlantic, when Benjamin Franklin published in 1750 his *Idea of an English School*, he had in mind a very radical idea indeed—a utilitarian education for

citizenship conducted entirely in the English language. Naturally, it was never tried, but a compromise was attempted. An academy in Philadelphia opened in 1751 with a so-called "English School," and when the academy became a college in 1755 (later to be called the University of Pennsylvania), the second head of its English School, Ebenezer Kinnersley, was given the title Professor of the English Tongue and Oratory. Significantly, he was both a Baptist clergyman and a scientist; his experiments in electricity were second in importance only to those of his friend Franklin. Even more significantly, the title given to Kinnersley, who was probably our first college professor of English in any sense, contained the word "Oratory." Oratory, you may remember, I have called the mother of "English." We shall see in a moment how this happened, but meanwhile let us notice that when Kinnersley resigned in 1773, his successor at Pennsylvania, the lawyer James Wilson, actually gave some lectures on English literature.

In order to understand this momentous development we must turn, not to England, but to Scotland. During the four decades from, roughly, 1742 to 1783, George Campbell, Henry Home (Lord Kames), the philosopher-historian David Hume, the political economist Adam Smith, and other influential Scotsmen agreed on the importance of the arts of public speaking and reading, not only for prospective clergymen, but also for educated citizens in general. As a young man, Adam Smith lectured on rhetoric and literature at Kirkcaldy in 1748-51. Another member of this "Scottish school of rhetoric," the popular Edinburgh preacher Hugh Blair, began to read lectures on composition in the University late in 1759, and the following year the town council made him professor of rhetoric. The experiment was given both significance and permanence in April 1762 with the founding of a regius professorship of rhetoric and belles-lettres,

to which Blair was appointed. Rhetoric was, of course, one of the oldest subjects in university education, but something now happened to it. Blair held this post until 1783, and, unlike the Oxford Professor of Poetry, who had a similar opportunity, he chose to lecture in English on English literature. Moreover, when he resigned in 1783 he published his lectures and thus gave other institutions a popular textbook, which Yale adopted in 1785, Harvard in 1788, and Dartmouth in 1822. Blair's was not the only textbook available, however, and the titles of some other influential ones may help me to make the point I am now concerned with. There were, for example, John Ward's two-volume *System of Oratory* (1759) and Thomas Sheridan's *Lectures on Elocution* (1763); and William Enfield's *The Speaker* (1774) quickly became, and long remained, the authoritative anthology of "recitations" from Shakespeare, Sterne, Pope, and more recent writers.

In an age that produced Charles Fox and Edmund Burke in England and Patrick Henry and James Otis in America, the atmosphere was right for a mushrooming of popular interest in oratory and "elocution." What had caused this, I suspect, was the dramatic development of parliaments in the eighteenth century, and the emergence of great orators who were not clergymen. In the second half of the eighteenth century the idea caught on quickly in America, inside, and even more outside, classrooms. The coming century was to witness the fame of Henry Ward Beecher, John Calhoun, Henry Clay, Stephen Douglas, Robert Ingersoll, Wendell Phillips, Daniel Webster, and others—to say nothing of a short, simple address delivered at a place called Gettysburg. Early teachers of "English" were also, usually, teachers of speech. As in ancient Greece and Rome, the art of "rhetoric" once again embraced non-clerical oratory.

In 1806 the Boylston professorship of

rhetoric and oratory was founded at Harvard, and the first appointee was John Quincy Adams, who later became President of the United States, thus setting a provocative precedent for all future teachers of English! Adams' lectures, published in 1810, were the first attempt by an American to reunite rhetorical theory with classical doctrines. The Boylston professor from 1819 to 1851 was Edward Tyrrel Channing, teacher of Dana, Emerson, Holmes, and Thoreau. The first half of the nineteenth century in the new republic was a time of many public lectures, of lyceums and other popular societies for literary and liberal education, of literary and debating societies on college campuses, and, in general, of much amateurish and informal attention to both rhetoric and belles-lettres. Although Emerson's famous "American scholar" address was delivered in 1837, it is important to remember that this was *not* a time that produced in America any literary or linguistic scholarship of real substance, and the professor of English language and literature did not immediately emerge. In the United States before 1860 only a very few colleges ventured to mention English literature as a subject in their catalogues or announcements. Dartmouth dared to do so in 1822. In 1827 Amherst offered "Lectures in English and American Literature" as part of a bravely projected modern course of study to parallel the traditional one for the ancient languages and literatures, but the offering was soon withdrawn. Another American pioneer was Middlebury, whose 1848-49 catalogue announced "Critiques on the British and American Classics" as a course in the third term of the junior year, and this offering survived for some decades. On the other hand, Oberlin College considered Shakespeare unsuitable for mixed classes until 1864. The regius professorship at Edinburgh and the Boylston professorship at Harvard were harbingers of things to come, but were not, essentially,

first steps in the development of an academic discipline that could demand, and get, equal recognition with the classical languages. For such a revolutionary change in established patterns of education some other factors were necessary—among them, a new, scientific linguistics, a new and rigorous methodology adaptable to literary studies, and a new concept of liberal education. These three factors were all to emerge during the last three quarters of the nineteenth century, but their impacts and results were to be different in the United States from what they were in England.

There were only seven universities in the entire British Isles from 1591 to 1828, a period in which more than *seventy* colleges or universities were founded in America, to survive down to our own day. In 1828, however, what is now University College, London, opened as the University of London, and during the remainder of the nineteenth century the number of British universities *doubled*. This “red-brick” explosion of higher education in England, which tardily reflects a similar phenomenon in the United States, is complex in its origins, but one of the factors was popular reaction against exclusiveness and traditionalism in the curriculum, especially the domination of the classical languages. It is not, therefore, mere coincidence that the sudden proliferation of universities in England produced formal instruction in the modern languages, including English, and even in English literature. Nor is it coincidence that both Oxford and Cambridge were the last universities in the entire English-speaking world to establish professorships in English language and literature. Even after they had reduced to meaningless formalities the medieval exercises in the Schools, the narrow system of written final examinations which succeeded, in 1780 and 1800, prevented the growth of any new kind of learning. The entrenched classical curriculum was not only reconfirmed in the

venerable universities which had been looked up to as models by Harvard, Yale, and other institutions; effective means had been found to discourage any possible competition. Moreover, until as late as 1871 graduates of Cambridge and Oxford still had to subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles, proving their adherence to the Church of England. This fact accounts for the growth during the eighteenth century of the many nonconformist academies, which served as theological seminaries for non-Anglicans, and often, not incidentally, were receptive to ideas of an “English” education. Although it soon added an Anglican college, King’s, the new University of London began as a *non-sectarian* institution, and it is not surprising, therefore, that when it opened its doors on Gower Street in 1828, it had a professor of English language and literature. His name was Thomas Dale; he was a popular preacher in London and an old-fashioned high church evangelical; in his first year as professor he wrote and published *An Introductory Lecture to a Course upon the Principles and Practice of English Composition*. Dale was the author of seventy some other works, including some minor poetry, a translation of Sophocles, and an edition of the poems of William Cowper. We need not be ashamed of England’s first English professor. We shall meet many other clergymen as English professors in the decades to follow, in both Great Britain and the United States. The fact is significant; until another new university, the Johns Hopkins, insisted that English professors needed a special kind of preparation, the literacy and oratorical skills and genteel acquaintance with literature that clergymen presumably had were considered preparation enough. What eventually made that preparation seem inadequate was the development of a new scientific linguistics and a new historical criticism.

For my personal edification I have tried to trace the growth of the teaching

of English in many dozens of institutions in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, and I wish there were time to give you some of the more interesting details, and to name some of the more interesting people. One other phenomenon, however, I must not fail to mention, for it is important to what I shall later want to say about the departmentalization of our subject. Unlike Thomas Dale of London, many early professors of English were simultaneously professors of modern *history*. This was the case at Cornell, Toronto, Manchester, Queen's University (Belfast), Queen's College (Cork), the University colleges at Cardiff and Liverpool, and elsewhere. On the other hand, one year after Springhill College, Birmingham, opened in 1838, it appointed the *Edinburgh* reviewer Henry Rogers as its professor of English literature and language, mathematics, and mental philosophy. By the time of the commencement of the American Civil War, the embryonic or new universities of England had made English a familiar if not yet wholly acceptable part of the curriculum, and the ancient Scottish and Irish universities then followed suit in their own way. Aberdeen, founded in 1494, in 1860 led the way with the appointment of Alexander Bain as professor of logic and English. This was not an unnatural combination; logic as an academic subject used to be associated with rhetoric, and argumentative composition was even thought of as a branch of logic. In any case, logic and English were not separated at Aberdeen until 1894. At St. Andrews the early professorship embraced logic, metaphysics, and English literature. Dublin University, which had been founded in 1591, in 1855 finally attached to the normal duties of its professor of oratory the obligation to give instruction in English literature, but when this man gave up the post in 1866 to become professor of Greek, Dublin appointed Edward

Dowden as its first professor of English, a post he held until his death in 1913.

These titular details, with their suggestions of compromise and uncertainty about the sufficient substance of English as an academic subject, make a revealing background for the stubborn unwillingness of the two most ancient universities to get on the bandwagon of modernity. But in 1873 English was finally admitted into the Oxford "pass" examination for the final Schools—the tacit assumption being that students not bright enough to try for honors in the classics could somehow obtain adequate instruction in English from their college tutors. In 1877 an attempt was made to extend this gain by establishing an honors school of modern literature, including English, but it of course failed.

From 1854 to 1868 Friedrich Max Müller had been the second Taylorian professor of modern European languages at Oxford, but this new post, so widely unwelcome in the University, was abolished when he abandoned it to take the new chair of comparative philology. Here was the shape of things to come. The English Philological Society had been founded in 1842; the Cambridge and Oxford Philological Societies, in 1868 and 1870, respectively. Max Müller, who probably did more than any other man to popularize Germanic philology or linguistics in England, had published his two-volume *Science of Language* in 1861-63. When Oxford finally acquired a Merton Professor of English language and literature, he was to be another eminent philologist (A. S. Napier)—unhappily, as critics immediately complained, an expert on early English *language* with little or no interest in literature. In the United States the first professor of the English language and comparative philology was the scholarly Francis Andrew March, who was given this title by Lafayette College in 1857 and held it until 1906. The title was highly significant; it spelled

out the new field of linguistics that was eventually to give English studies solidity and respectability and influence at even the old, established universities. At Harvard, for example, that fine scholar, Francis James Child, who had been Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory since 1851, and had actually been lecturing on English language and literature since about 1854, in 1876 became the first professor of English literature. English was now moving toward a new "image" or identity.

We need occasionally to remind ourselves of what English amounted to only eighty-three years ago, when a few leaders in the emerging profession felt it necessary to organize a *Modern Language Association*, joining forces with French and German to challenge the entrenched classical curriculum. In most of the colleges that had pioneered in teaching it, the place of English was still quite subordinate, both as to time allotted and results expected. The usual offering consisted of an hour or two of lectures for ten or twelve weeks by the professor of belles-lettres, who also taught such courses as history, logic, evidences of Christianity, moral philosophy, rhetoric, and oratory. The professor who taught *only* English was still a great rarity. The typical survey course was likely to be historical, biographical, and esthetic, with Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare the most important figures. There was rarely any attempt to study the language historically or comparatively, for almost no English teachers had been trained to do this. The simple truth is that by 1883 almost no English teachers had been trained (period). The typical professor, as we have seen, was a doctor of divinity who spoke and wrote the mother tongue grammatically, had a general "society knowledge" of the literature, and had not specialized in this or any other academic subject.

But graduate education was, as everyone now knows, vigorously launched in

the United States when the Johns Hopkins University opened in 1876, frankly setting out to import European (particularly German) ideals and methodology. It meant to naturalize, if possible, the spirit of specialization, the concept of the teacher as investigator and producing scholar, and, for our field, the "scientific" approach to literary and linguistic research. The fame of Paris and of the German universities had spread in this country for many decades, and so the stimulating example of Johns Hopkins was soon followed enthusiastically as other graduate schools sprang up in the institutions that could afford them. A new standard of post-baccalaureate work had been set. It was almost a symbolic act when English and German were combined into a single department at Johns Hopkins in 1882-83, with a future professor of German as head. Linguistically speaking, of course, this was not a strange marriage. Nor was it practically speaking, for if the young graduate student or recent Ph.D. in English had something to publish (as was now expected of him), the logical place to send it before 1884 was either the *Englische Studien* or *Anglia*, both published in Germany and both devoted to English philology. No publication in any English-speaking country was yet exclusively devoted to the study of any of the modern languages.

Graduate work in English on the Johns Hopkins pattern meant rigorous training in linguistics and textual analysis. It also meant that little or nothing beyond seventeenth-century English literature was worthy of serious attention in graduate instruction; after all, there was the practical problem of time; with the now accepted need of mastering Anglo-Saxon, Middle English, old and modern French, old and modern German, and, preferably, several other Germanic languages or dialects, how could one possibly take graduate courses in recent English or American literature, even if they were offered? The

linguistic emphasis of graduate training at Johns Hopkins—and subsequently at Harvard, Yale, and elsewhere—was to produce, during the next fifty years in America, a completely new kind of English professor, later to be rendered obsolete by the same educational revolution which had created him.

I must now repeat what I have had occasion to write elsewhere: the main objectives for which the MLA was founded would have been achieved during the next few decades whether or not the MLA had ever existed. From about 1883 onward, the classics declined in power and prestige, and the star of the modern languages rose. At least four factors in the decline and fall of the prescribed, classical curriculum are now quite clear. There were the impact of science, the American spirit of utilitarianism or pragmatism, and the exciting, new dream of democratic, popular education, an assumed corollary of which was the free elective system. A fourth factor may be described as a widespread mood of questioning and experimentation in education, a practical, revisionary spirit that challenged all traditions and accepted practices. Ironically, this attitude was later, in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century, to disparage *all* foreign language study, but meanwhile it suffered the modern foreign languages to compete on equal terms with, and almost to supplant, the classical languages. English, on the other hand, was not to encounter the same reverses in favor; as we have seen, it was almost providentially prepared by recent events to be “scientific” and difficult in the most approved Germanic manner, but it was also, when provided with the means soon after 1883, quite willing to be utilitarian and popular. Since we still live with this paradox, and enjoy its precarious benefits, we had better understand it. It was the teaching of freshman composition that quickly entrenched English departments in the college and university struc-

ture—so much so that no one seemed to mind when professors of English, once freed from this slave labor, became as remote from everyday affairs as the classicists had ever been. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever shown why it is more “useful” to know Anglo-Saxon than to know Latin, or educationally more valuable to know English literature than to know Greek literature; and, in my considered judgment, either would be a very difficult case to make. But no one needs to persuade the American public that freshman composition is essential, despite the fact that it rarely accomplishes any of its announced objectives.

Surprising as the idea may first appear to you, there was, of course, no compelling reason at the outset why the teaching of *composition* should have been entrusted to teachers of the English language and literature. Teaching the language meant teaching it historically and comparatively, according to the latest methods of scientific philology. It was a far cry from this to freshman themes. As everyone knew in 1883, composition was a branch of rhetoric, a subject which had been a basic part of the college curriculum since medieval times. As everyone also knew in 1883, composition involved oratory in addition to writing intended only for silent reading. Another relevant fact was a matter of recent history: composition was now permitted in the mother tongue. But these facts do *not* add up to the conclusion that the professor of rhetoric and oratory should disappear, to be supplanted by the teacher of English language and literature. In 1876, when Francis Child became Harvard's first professor of English, his post as professor of rhetoric and oratory was immediately filled by someone else. And naturally so.

Chronology is the key to what finally happened; if “English” had been somewhat *later* in gaining academic recognition and respectability in the United States (as it actually was at Cambridge

and Oxford, for example), it would probably never have been so strongly affected by the educational events of the 1880's and 1890's which we must now consider. This was a period in which the whole *structure* of higher education in America underwent profound changes, yielding to the pressures of new learning, the elective system, increased specialization, acceptance of the idea that practical or useful courses had a place in higher education, and, not least in importance, the actual *doubling* of college enrollments during the last quarter of the century. So long as there had been a narrow, prescribed curriculum and not too many students, departments of instruction had little or no administrative significance, and although the word "department" was sometimes used earlier, it was not really until the 1890's (at Harvard, for example, not until 1891; at my own university, not until 1893) that departments became important administrative units, pigeon-holes into which one dropped all the elements of a rapidly expanding curriculum. Delegating responsibility, college officials looked to the various departments to judge the suitability of course offerings, the relationships of courses, prerequisites, and programs for majors and minors; to make recommendations for appointments, promotions, and salary increases; and to seek money or equipment or both. Perhaps inevitably, departments soon became competitive and ambitious, looking anxiously at any unoccupied territory between themselves and neighboring departments.

It was in this atmosphere that "English" in the United States, very recently became an accepted subject, grew to maturity, over-reached itself, and planted deeply the seeds of most of its subsequent troubles as an academic discipline. Early chairmen and early professors of English *literature* were willing if not eager to increase the prestige of their subject and the numbers of their students and course offerings by embracing, not only *linguis-*

tics (including English grammar and the history of the language and even, whenever possible, comparative philology), but also *rhetoric*, which normally included, of course, oratory, elocution, and all forms of written composition. How this latter coup was possible I shall explain in a moment, but first let us remind ourselves of the full scope of the aggressiveness (some would say acquisitiveness) exhibited by departments of "English." They were later to embrace, just as greedily, journalism, business writing, creative writing, writing for engineers, play-writing, drama and theater, and American literature, and were eventually to be offering courses in contemporary literature, comparative literature, the Bible and world classics in translation, American civilization, the humanities, and "English for foreigners." In sum, English departments became the catchall for the work of teachers of extremely diverse interests and training, united theoretically but not actually by their common use of the mother tongue. Disintegration was therefore inevitable. Since there was no diminishing of the various forces that caused the original creation of departmental structure in colleges of arts and sciences, splintering of departments eventually ensued, often with great bitterness and an unhealthy increase in competitive spirit.

Let us pause a moment to recognize the practical implications of what I have been saying. Thanks first to its academic origins, and then to the spirit of competition and aggressiveness engendered by departmentalization, "*English*" has never really defined itself as a discipline. Before 1883, as we have seen, it was associated chaotically with rhetoric, logic, history, and many another definable subject. In 1885 Professor John McElroy of Pennsylvania was boasting to his MLA colleagues: "Today English is no longer, as it once was, every modern subject of the course except itself." He was a Professor of Rhetoric and the En-

glish Language, and his self-congratulations came just on the eve of history repeating itself. The typical English teacher in the 1890's and later no longer had a multi-title, but he belonged to a department that had multi-purposes, and normally his graduate training had almost nothing to do with what he found himself doing in the classroom. Having recently mastered Anglo-Saxon and the techniques of textual analysis, he began by teaching composition or speech, with perhaps an occasional survey course to lessen the pain. Much later, if he survived, he might be allowed to teach his specialty to graduate students who, in turn, would begin by teaching freshman composition.

How did it happen that newly created departments of English, with some variety of titles, were able at the close of the nineteenth century to preempt instruction in the skills of writing and speaking, to assume administrative control over the teaching of composition in any form? (This was not, to be sure, universal; at some few institutions, departments of rhetoric, oratory, or elocution developed along side departments of English; but the prevailing administrative practice was to lump all these subjects under the rubric of "English.") As we have seen, historically the academic study of English literature was a protégé of the study of one of the oldest subjects in the curriculum, rhetoric, which during the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, particularly in the Scottish universities, became increasingly identified with belles-lettres and literary criticism. But the Scottish school of rhetoric had also associated rhetoric with secular oratory. What probably changed this in the first half of the nineteenth century, and caused rhetoric to be more and more associated with belles-lettres, was the shift in attention from the written word to the voice and body control involved in the increasingly popular study of "elocution." Although taught in a

number of American colleges during the nineteenth century, and required at some, elocution not only failed to achieve academic respectability; it caused a flight of teachers from oratory to imaginative literature (e.g., Hiram Corson at Cornell, or Bliss Perry at a later period), and it seriously damaged the once great prestige and importance of speech training. Elocution in the colleges was taught for the most part by specially trained itinerant teachers rather than by regular faculty members. In 1873 it ceased to be a required subject at Harvard. By 1900 the new School of Oratory at the University of Texas was carefully explaining that its purpose was *not* training in elocution. When the Speech Association of America* was founded in 1914, it disdainfully dissociated itself from the "elocutionists" of the private schools. Perhaps in the hope of gaining academic respectability, elocution at the close of the nineteenth century associated itself more and more with literary criticism and appreciation, but this simply caused it to be swallowed up the more easily by English departments, which could then conveniently de-emphasize it.

To sum up: the ancient subject of rhetoric, which at first showed signs of adapting itself to changing times while preserving both its integrity and its vitality, in the nineteenth century lost both integrity and independent vitality by dispersing itself to academic thinness. It permitted oratory to become identified with elocution, and, as for written composition, it allowed this to become chiefly identified with that dismal, unflowering desert, freshman theme-writing. It is little wonder that speech and composition were readily accepted by administrators as appendices of English literature, especially when various events conspired to tie the knot tightly. In 1888, for example, the New England Commission for Colleges set a list of *books for reading* as preparation for college en-

trance examinations in English *composition*. In 1892 the "Committee of Ten" of the National Education Association formally recommended that literature and composition be unified in the high school course. That did it. Increasingly, thereafter, college entrance exams linked composition with literature, and, not unnaturally, linked high school work in "English" with beginning college work in composition. Speech training, once so important in education (as, indeed, it still is or should be), tended to get left out of this convenient combination, with results that should have been predictable.

And you know the sequel. Little by little English departments lost journalism, speech, and theater, and recently we have seen the development of separate undergraduate departments of comparative literature and linguistics. There have been polylingual grumbings from foreign language departments about the English department monopoly of courses in world literature. For a time there was a real threat of separate departments of "communications" (e.g., at Michigan State University), but "English" has somehow managed to hold on stubbornly to all written composition not intended for oral delivery—a subject which has always had a most tenuous connection with the academic study of language and literature, but which, not incidentally, from the outset has been a great secret of strength for "English" with both administrators and public, and latterly has made possible the frugal subsidizing of countless graduate students who cannot wait to escape it. Should our graduate students some day be subsidized instead by the Federal Government (as seems to me likely to happen eventually), it remains to be seen whether or not the nineteenth-century union of literature and composition was a true marriage or merely a marriage of convenience.

I have been tracing for you some not very ancient history, and I should like, finally, to draw some personal conclu-

sions from it. They are rather drastic, and you may not be able to accept any of them. History teaches different things to different people, and some people believe that nothing can be learned from it. As I stated initially, I believe that we can learn a great deal. You may think me unfitted to be a chairman when I say, now, that the history of our profession inspires in me very little respect for departments of English; their story is one of acquisitiveness, expediency, and incredible stupidity. I care a lot about liberal education, and I care a lot about the study of literature in English, but it seems to me that English departments have cared much less about liberal education and their own integrity than they have about their administrative power and prosperity.

We cannot turn back the clock and bring speech back into English departments, but this realistic fact seems to me no justification for English abandoning all training in speech and oral composition for its majors—especially for those who intend to become teachers at any level of education, including the graduate level. English needs still to learn something from its mother.

And even more from its father. It strikes me as ironic and more than slightly ridiculous that we increasingly want "English" to mean the close reading of words while we steadily increase our ignorance of the nature and history of language in general and the English language in particular. Study of literature without more than casual or amateurish knowledge of language is destined, in my considered judgment, to share the fate of elocution. The penalty most fitting this crime would be to make us a sub-department of linguistics.

It also strikes me as ironic and more than slightly ludicrous that we take it on ourselves to teach, not only literature in English, but also world literature, in a monolingual vacuum. Our early associations with the classical languages and the

modern foreign languages were meaningful and valuable; we have abandoned them at a high cost to our integrity and our common sense.

The history I have sketched for you shows "English" changing its character many times in the brief century of its academic existence, and these changes have of course continued in the past four decades, about which I have said nothing but am tempted to say a great deal, since they are the period in which I have been an active, conscious member of the profession. Let me say only that, so far as I know, few if any of the many changes have come about as a result of deliberate,

long-range planning on the national level, despite the existence of the MLA and the NCTE. And that suggests my final thought: there will certainly be further changes in the years to come, but are we not now mature enough as a profession, and "hep" enough as historians, to frame our own future history, not for the benefit of English departments, but for the welfare of the young and the benefit of American education? I believe that we are, and I care about where English departments came from *only* because I care very deeply indeed about where they are going. Let me urge you to strike while the irony is hot.

Literature—Our Untamable Discipline

JOHN C. GERBER

IF THE BOYS ON MADISON AVENUE were to talk to us about teaching literature they would undoubtedly in their quaint and flashy way tell us that we have a tiger in our classrooms. Such an analogy for the literary work would not be too ridiculous. For in it we do have something of a tiger. We can cage it briefly. We can pet it, study its history, appreciate its beauty, analyze it, tell myths about it, and show that, given its beginning and middle, its end is inevitable. We can do all of these things but we cannot permanently control it, however ingenious the harness. The moment we nod ever so slightly, it is out of the door and gone.

What I am saying, of course, is that we have never found one way of completely and satisfactorily teaching literature, and

probably never will. Literature itself is too explosive. Our critical and pedagogical techniques are too susceptible to the vagaries of taste. We and our students are of too infinite a variety. The times continually develop new needs and make new requirements upon us. It would be naive, therefore, to suppose that we shall ever reach complete and lasting agreement on how we should proceed.

Yet, as we look back over the last hundred and fifty years, two strong trends *can* be detected in the welter of classroom procedures, and from these two I believe a third is just beginning to emerge. If I have a major proposition, it is that this third trend is the most promising yet, and is one that deserves our support.

The mark of the first trend was its emphasis upon *engagement*, especially moral and emotional engagement. Students were taught to take the literary work to heart, as though it were written for them personally. This trend, as I see it, reached its peak toward the end of the

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