

The Unnamed Work of English

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AT THE 2010 Summer Seminar East, there was a certain amount of reflection on “the stories we tell ourselves about what we do” as English professors. These stories of course have everything to do with the stories we need to tell outsiders in an era in which the value of English is not taken for granted. In what follows, I hope to suggest some of the risks of our telling a twisted story in an attempt to strengthen our institutional position.

What *do* English professors do? Addressing participants on the first night of the seminar, our host, Kent Cartwright, noted how often alumni of his institution express gratitude for their English courses, which they say have “deepened, transformed, and enriched” their lives. For a long time, this has been the *so what?* of English departments. Most of us probably hope we’re doing something to help prepare our students to lead richer lives. But in professional forums we use a different idiom and speak of the need to cultivate critical thinking or to prepare students for responsible citizenship. People hesitate to say they also aspire to create the conditions for a richly lived life, in fear of coming across as vague, grandiose, or traditional.

But the cost of this collective reticence is that teachers with a real calling for the human dimension can fall into a chronic alienation, and their pedagogy can suffer. In the course of the research for a book I’m writing on the moral life of our discipline, I’ve encountered many scholars who say that they find it hard to take their students where they themselves most wanted to go as undergraduates. Whenever they guide discussion toward the issue of what life itself might be about, a little voice tells them they are doing something “humanist” and unprofessional. Many of these people came into English with a set of commitments that could fairly be called humanist. But the profession as a whole doesn’t think much of these commitments, and these teachers lose confidence, especially if they are young.

Among the colleagues I have formally interviewed for purposes of the book, those who are suffering worst are people who seem to me to belong constitutionally to a category of teacher-healers. They are people with a special affinity for the inwardness of the literary text and the soul work of the human being. Because these interests code as traditional, or even spiritual, people in this group get used to masking what they care about. As scholars, they allow the search for meaning to be vouched for by cultural critique, formal analysis, or historicism. Typically they quite like their teaching, and they feel something meaningful is accomplished with their classes. But alongside the courses they’ve taught is the one they might have taught if they had not half accepted the idea that what they care most about is ahistorical and flimsy.

Nowhere do I mean to suggest that these people have their finger on the one thing our discipline should be about. It takes all kinds of approaches to make a vitalized English department. I agree, moreover, with colleagues who think that “English” defines a subject matter and should not become a pretext for something

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else. But the texts we teach are very provocative. They get people thinking about all kinds of things. Something is wrong if the people who want to think about the large human questions are feeling they need to slink around.

The meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn writes of certain fairy tales in which a prince or princess loses a golden ball. Within the unreal time frame of the fairy tale, it takes only a day or two for the ball to be recovered. But in the actual human life cycle, Kabat-Zinn writes, it can take us thirty or forty years even to realize that we have lost touch with the golden object—the creativity and presence to ourselves that we were capable of as young children. The fairy tales ultimately suggest that we can recover the ball only through a series of trials in which we “convers[e] with those aspects of our psyches that we instinctively turn away from into unconsciousness” (83).

I hope that it will not give offense to say that the English curriculum deepens lives by offering evidence of other complex minds that have not turned away from the threatening aspects of psychic life. The act of communal close reading can make it safe for students to “converse with” the author’s (or speaker’s or character’s) own conversation with these troubling aspects. Such training can prepare them for times in life when they will need to bring the conversation home and integrate their own disavowed complexities.

I feel that everything I’ve just said would be unexceptionable conversation in the halls of an English department. But it has a more or less humanist ring and so fits ill with the account the discipline gives of itself. Even airing these ideas in the present forum, I can see how wrong they look from the perspective of the profession’s dominant ideology. I’d like to reflect for a moment on this wrongness.

How, a skeptical colleague might ask, can Kabat-Zinn write about “our psyches,” as if all psyches were the same? And doesn’t his reading of the golden ball bespeak a Romantic notion that we each have a secret “self” or “presence,” which can be occluded and later recovered? Worse, what does it mean in political terms that Kabat-Zinn (as is true) has borrowed the whole metaphor of the golden ball from Robert Bly’s *Iron John*, a fund of archetypes for the men’s movement? If this kind of suspicious interrogation of claims for “the human” had never been cultivated, the intellectual life of English would be the poorer. The problem is that the suspicious habit has become reflexive, as Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick famously noted in her piece on “paranoid reading.”

I think that one of the most toxic effects of reflexive suspicion is that it can divide people from themselves, preventing them from following some of their own intuitions to a conclusion. A colleague wrote me that when she raised the question of professional morale with her students in a recent PhD seminar, several of them revealed that their training had reduced them to a state of despair. “And when I say, despair,” she wrote, “I am not using the word metaphorically.” These students sensed so much danger in the intellectual environment that they felt unable to take “the risk of honesty and creativity” in their writing (Bammer). Gina Hiatt, an academic writing coach and the president of a large coaching resource called Academic Ladder, told me that many of her clients in the humanities struggle with writer’s block, brought on by the idea that if they say what they actually think, people will “hate” them (Hiatt).

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I believe that our profession has created an environment fraught with what in psychoanalytic terms would be called “terminal objects.” Christopher Bollas coined this term in describing certain patients who are frightened of the full play of mind that might acquaint them with their unconscious life. Whenever the analytic dialogue threatens to become too intense or revealing, the patient will summon a favorite object of fixated emotion, for example a detested spouse, to fill the field of attention. A moment’s brooding on this object is “terminal”: it is utterly predictable and thus terminates free association and “the self’s disseminative movement.” The “false psychic intensities” aroused by the hated object displace the more fluid and creative intensities of unconscious self-unfolding (73–75).

It is as if our professional community tacitly agreed, sometime in the 1980s, to share certain terminal objects—words and ideas that recall us to the things we (are supposed to) hate, like capitalism, liberal humanism, and the bourgeois subject. These hot foci, which are still with us even after the presumed death of theory, conduce to much discourse that appears passionate yet is safe and fixated. Once a line of inquiry has arrived at one of the terminal objects, showing for example how bourgeois selfhood is upheld by the text, it too often happens that the full range of thought and feeling the text might have aroused is terminated. This terminal cast of mind is the more ironic in that one of the things that literary experience is usually good for is its capacity to “tease us out of thought,” coaxing us past our fixed ideas about what we are supposed to affirm or to hate. None of this is to deny the brilliance or the truth of some of our profession’s critiques of, say, capitalism or bourgeois ideology. But I think many readers will be familiar with a default setting that produces a lot of repetitive and lifeless work.

As to the despair my colleague saw in her students, graduate school is an education in the art of ensuring that the profession’s terminal objects are never flung at oneself. What if one were to develop some thoughts that resonated with Kabat-Zinn’s idea of the golden ball, only to be told that one’s thinking had an “archetypal” cast and was thus “conservative”? An economical strategy, given the frantic pace of the training, is to frisk every intuition before it is well along, making canny decisions about which ones to reject. In the interviews for my book, I often see the pat down happening before my eyes. It is an essential strategy for professional survival, adopted even by the liveliest minds. An interviewee will offer a personal view about the nature of psychic life or aesthetic experience, then will point out that what has just been said veers close to humanism or some other discredited perspective. At that point the initial idea is simply dropped. If you have to name the terminal object before someone uses it against you, your momentum suffers.

Returning, then, to the question of the discipline’s stories about itself, one key reason the profession underplays its capacity to deepen lives is a collective dread of coming across as endorsing—another terminal object—liberal self-cultivation. But in behaving thus, we are of course suppressing the very thing that makes us attractive to many of our majors and that helps validate us in the eyes of the outside world.¹

The critical schools responsible for today’s terminal objects are now losing their cachet. As Rita Felski recently wrote, “Literary studies is in the doldrums”; people are

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tired of the hermeneutics of suspicion and are casting about for new approaches. On the other hand, when I hear about exciting new developments in English, I do not always feel invigorated. I happen to have an interest in some of the rising approaches (in particular, cognitive studies). But no array of stimulating new work is going to repair collective morale unless the profession faces down its ambivalence about the “old” work that keeps going on in classrooms.

The danger I see is that as the methodological game changes, the dimension of English that bears on depth of living is once again going to be overlooked or depreciated. One of the most interesting sessions at the 2010 ADE Summer Seminar East, for example, was on the digital humanities. I learned a great deal from the session and came away understanding more about what the digital humanities contribute to the enterprise of English. But in the course of a very thoughtful question-and-answer session, an excusable shorthand evolved, according to which the modes of inquiry that do not communicate with the digital humanities were “traditional.” At the same time, the idea was floated that “the digital humanities seem like the first ‘next big thing’ in a long time.”² So the conversation, conducted with the best of intentions, situated the new and big alongside an unexciting place known as the traditional study of English.

When English departments overvalue the trend of the moment, the inward dimension that is part of their old business goes unnamed or is misnamed. As I have been suggesting, the failure to give an affirmative name to this aspect of the enterprise is costly. I think I see an analogy to something that happens in childhood, when a child’s aspirations are discounted by the parents. The psychoanalysts Robert Stolorow and George Atwood describe how children respond to parents who either disregard or disparage the ordinary strivings of childhood: “When a child’s experiences are consistently not responded to or are actively rejected, the child perceives that aspects of his own experience are unwelcome or damaging to the caregiver.” To protect the tie to the caregiver, the child must repress entire “sectors” of his or her “experiential world” (368–69). I believe that as adults, we are still susceptible to this kind of compromise. (People who have studied truly dangerous groups like cults think so.)³ When our environment tells us that something we care about is trivial or damaging, we can, almost without thinking, safeguard the tie to the environment by repressing our interest in that thing.

Poststructuralist theory told members of our profession that if they had a stake in the inner life, their attitude was “bourgeois” and therefore damaging. Many members who were curious about the inner life chose to let that investment go unarticulated and unnourished, perhaps with a hope of reviving it someday. It is less upsetting to be thought “traditional” than to be thought “bourgeois,” so things are probably improving. But in either case, the average twenty-three-year-old faced with these labels will make a quick calculation and decide which parts of himself or herself to sequester in the interest of belonging.

In a presentation for the seminar’s panel on the digital humanities (“How We Read”), N. Katherine Hayles outlined a new story that is emerging about something our field contributes to the world. Today’s young people, Hayles pointed out, have

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cognitive styles shaped by the networked media in which they are steeped for a large part of their waking hours; as a consequence they have a greater capacity than their parents for “hyperattention.” Hyperattention, as Hayles elsewhere writes, “is characterized by switching focus rapidly between different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom” (“Hyper and Deep Attention” 187). Conversely, the sustained or “deep attention” that is requisite for reading a poem or novel is something for which this generation has less aptitude than do preceding ones. Hayles sensibly recommends that we meet the students where they are and think about how to link the hyperattention in which they are skilled with the deep attention required for some of the things they will want to accomplish as adults.

In such a context, those of us with more or less humanist commitments should come forward with an account of everything we think deep attention is good for. Within the constraints of her short presentation, Hayles spoke not about helping our students deepen their lives but about making them smarter by enhancing their capacity to identify patterns. She described an “epistemic shift,” in the age of hypermedia, from “searching for meaning” to “searching for patterns.” It appears that people growing up with hypermedia are measurably smarter than older generations in spatial perception and pattern recognition, effects of their sustained practice in hyperreading. Hayles suggested that, armed with this awareness, we can develop curricula designed to build on these strengths.

A question we need to place alongside these considerations, and one that Hayles hardly rules out, is, To what end? It would be a shame if the profession acted on Hayles’s groundbreaking work in such a way as to emphasize pattern at the expense of meaning. Nothing in the digital humanities inherently forecloses the existential questions. But these are times in which people with a passion *for* these questions, whether in the context of digital or of older media, will have to start talking more to one another and to our colleagues. Without this sustained conversation, there will be a lot of unvoiced dissatisfaction in our professional community.

Taking these questions beyond the context of the digital humanities, I recently interviewed a young man who had just completed his MA at a major research institution. He reported that he had been a little disappointed to find that graduate school was more or less “a gym for the mind.” It was all about smartness and did not move him, though he added that “it’s great if you want to work out” (Lopez). I gave this account some thought, and it occurred to me that there are two kinds of gyms available to human beings. There are those that emphasize mere fitness and those that incorporate a more existential dimension, as a tai chi class, for example, does. Undergraduate English classes—more often than graduate classes—offer a kind of tai chi, not just enhancing smartness but holding before the students an array of responses to the challenge of being human.

Smartness without this tai chi is like the muscle cultivated in an everyday gym. As my interviewee said, it’s great if you want to work out. What tai chi practitioners will say is that martial accomplishment without (forgive the term) spiritual development is simply brute force. Whenever our profession suggests that the meaning of life falls outside our expertise, we encourage a hypertrophy of muscle, at the expense

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of what another culture might call the spiritual dimension. I don't know what form this muscularity might take in the context of the next big thing; but what I've observed with the last big thing, namely poststructuralist theory, is a strain of brutality, a delight in trampling on whatever is small, living, and undefended.

Assuming that some readers agree with the foregoing thoughts, what are we going to tell our deans and provosts—that our department is going to move forward by making a place for the tai chi of English? We may be stuck. On the other hand, within the larger context of contemporary American society, the spiritual dimension is hardly unmarketable. Students these days need various kinds of literacy, but at the same time there is a widespread hunger within our culture for existential meaning. This is what many of the students I encounter in continuing education classes have come back to school for. Some of them work in industry and are already accomplished at identifying patterns in large data sets. One of my favorite students last winter worked in national intelligence. He came back to school not to get smarter but to enrich his life. He liked (or in fact loved) the gym aspect of literary study, but he also wanted to dwell with human mysteries.

Unless we can encourage an open conversation about how the teaching of English can offer access to these mysteries, we are going to continue to tell a communal story that depresses some of our best teachers, creating odd little compartments of repression in the mind. It would be interesting to hear what colleagues would say if asked what they might be compartmentalizing right now, for purposes of not being rejected. I think that what would come out would sound “traditional” only for a while, until people warmed up and got talking to one another.

Notes

1. John Guillory makes the most powerful recent argument I know of for thinking of reading as a valuable form of self-cultivation; he makes the case through Foucault's concept of “the care of the self.”
2. This comment was quoted from Pannapacker. I am incidentally a great admirer of Pannapacker, whose running commentary on academic life sometimes treats issues that overlap with the themes of the present piece.
3. See Galanter, esp. ch. 6, “The Cult as a Social System.”

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