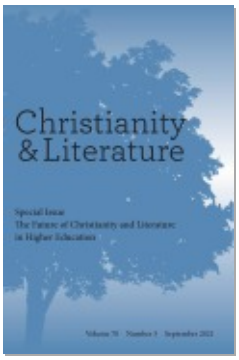
“Some Work of Noble Note”: Changes and Chances in Literary Pedagogy



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Abstract. English departments at Christian liberal arts institutions have faced a broadband array of economic and cultural challenges in recent years, some generated at the departmental or programmatic level and other imposed from without due to shifting generational commitments; thankfully that same regraded terrain has unearthed opportunities to remake ourselves, to renew our commitments to the college-level study of the good, the true, and the beautiful in literature.

Keywords. English majors, enrollment challenges, literary culture

Branding

During the dark, early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I attended one of those live-stream, artist-in-their-living-room events with a group of musicians, and during the talk-back, pointed out a number of references to lines of poetry in their songs, asking "were some of you English majors?" The lead singer and principal songwriter confessed that he had been one at Toccoa Falls College and that the Rilke, T.S. Eliot, and Maya Angelou references in the songs were his fault. A man after my own heart, I thought, and a win for English majors everywhere! But then he quickly disclaimed: something to the effect of, "Yes, I was an English major; it was a pointless waste." My rising reverie was, as can probably be guessed, short-lived.

His disavowal put me in mind of a comedy sketch I saw earlier in the year that featured a similar distancing gesture. In it, the stand-up comic John Mulaney recounts his decision to major in English in college, saying:

> What did I get for my money? What is college? . . . I went to college, and I have no idea what it was. . . . By the way, I agreed to give them $120,000 when I was seventeen years old, with no attorney present. That's illegal!... They pulled me out of high school; I was in sweat pants, all confused. Two guys in clip-on ties are like, "Come on, son, do the right thing. Sign here and you'll be an English major." I was like,

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> "Okay." That's right, you heard me: an English major… I paid $120,000 for someone to tell me to go read Jane Austen, and then I didn't. That's the worst use of 120 grand I can possibly fathom.[1]

Now, I happen to think, with many others, that getting a humanities degree from a private liberal arts university is one of the wisest investments a person can make, but the irony of Mulaney's tarnishing his degree thus may be instructive for those considering the present and future of literary studies because I take it to be reflective of the general culture's recent disposition toward our work. What I mean is, though humanities degrees are not primarily (and thank God) utilitarian, Mulaney is one of those rare cases of a graduate who secures a job in exactly their field of study and makes a fortune from doing so. Here he has built an empire made only of words. He tells stories for a fabulous living. That's it. He organizes his lived experience into language, polishes the syntax and timing, creates pacing and narrative force and structure, and then delivers his composition in front of people who pay to hear him do it. That's not only adjacent to his English degree, or a case of his "using his degree" in a novel manner unplanned for by its architects; it's straight down the middle of the plate. Mulaney does exactly the things we professors of English train people to do. But what's odd to me is that he uses those skills to say the people who gave them to him conveyed no value.

Obviously, this reminds me of Shakespeare's Caliban, who in *The Tempest* remarks to Prospero, "You taught me language; and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!"[2] This phenomenon seems to be spreading. I recall for instance an article in the *New York Times Magazine* in which a student is given a full scholarship to an Ivy League school and, still not having enough money, lobbies the college president for support during spring break, which he gets, along with gift cards to spend at the local cafe and who is then admitted to graduate school, developing critical thinking and writerly abilities as well as the platforming that comes with being an elite college alumni—all of which he then uses to say that the college failed him.[3] I was aghast, reading it. Every single idea he had, someone funded. Every request granted. If colleges are *alma mater*, what kind of way is this to treat such a generous, such an obsequious one as his?

Another example of the same posture surfaced recently in an essay in which an author describes the futility of education as "going for another graduate degree I wouldn't use."[4] These occurrences are so odd to me; this one for three reasons. First, the essay itself begins with a well-placed and clear Dickens reference, which likely helped get it published, as did the clear thinking, compositional structure, and poetic sensibility it evinces. Second, the essay describes the author's experience doing side jobs in college, but then mentions that he has, since that time, never held a nine-to-five job, which means that he's either making a living in academia or as a freelance writer: both jobs for which his literary education would have prepared him.

And third, the essay in question is published in *Best American Essays*. How people come to craft essays with enough clarity and force to be published in the first place, much less to be selected as representative of state of the art and then to claim that the degrees that bestowed just such skills are useless is a bit of cognitive dissonance with which the broader culture seems somehow comfortable.

So, we have a branding problem. English departments confer a real and demonstrable value, a fact to which business leaders perennially testify. *Send us more humanities majors*, they plead.[5] But it seems to me, given the examples above, that we are not perhaps doing a very good job of articulating what that value is. That's one challenge we face. There are others.

Big Story

When I was an undergraduate, a major part of my studies was building a sense of story out of the great and complex drama that is literary tradition. I was interested in the poems and authors, of course, but I was also interested in the eras that housed them. The order didn't matter, but the coverage did. So I'd take Sixteenth/Seventeenth Century writers one semester, Medieval Literature the next, and if I took Romanticism the following year, I would feel a little strange until an opportunity arose to take Eighteenth-Century. It was like I had missed a season of a show I'd been binging. How did the characters get from there to here? Why had the tastes changed so drastically? What was I missing? The reason I had this urge to backfill wasn't because the department emphasized it. They really didn't. But like everyone, I was drawn to the big story: how did we get where we are? Where are we going?

Given this, one challenge literary departments face today is how we offer a coherent or compelling story. The development of literature in English is an interesting enough narrative to provide intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction for an entire life, and certainly for the span of a degree. Seeing ideas change, forms morph, seeing the cutting edge dull with use, the rebellion against it and a new edge honed, seeing authors respond or react to others across the span of oceans and centuries: it's riveting stuff. Our challenge is to find out how to give that sense of story, of coherence, to students who take a patchwork of classes grouped increasingly by identity or affinity groups. It is important to say no one wants to walk back the gains made toward more global perspectives in recent decades and it is hard to view the campaign toward diversity as anything but a sum good. But we do need to find a way of telling the story of literature in a more nuanced way than resistance/oppression binaries. I wonder if we have programmatically sacrificed depth for breadth and therefore sentenced our students to eat ever only from the *hors d'ouvres* tray, never knowing the rhythm, custom, and rich fulfillment of a proper meal.

Inheritance

A third challenge we face, which is similar though not the same as the one above is that the removal of shared cultural heritage renders literary artistry less effective. For example, George Herbert's remarkable poems work so well in part because his audience was biblically literate. When he writes, for example, "taste my meat: / So I did sit and eat,"[6] he is trusting his readers to know Luke 12:37—"that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit downe to meat"—and to possess a theology of the Eucharist robust enough to recognize what he's *doing* with it. So too Martin Luther King's allusions that every valley will be lifted up fall flat—is he preparing a civic regrade scheme? Something to do with mining?—if the hearer knows nothing about the prophet Isaiah. Because literature is so often a commentary on or a corrective of cultural trends past and present, students who are—evermore it seems—illiterate to their own history and heritage struggle to parse *why* the works many have cherished are so astonishing.

What Wonders?

A fourth challenge English departments face in my estimation is a generalized, and increasing, lack of wonder. It has been my good fortune sometimes to show students around the treasures of Rome under the auspices of study abroad programs, and I've noticed a palpable shift in their attitudes thereto. I used to find that, over the course of the summer, students became more open to new ideas. Their Protestant skepticism of the Roman Catholic Church for instance, became a guarded, begrudging respect, at least for her cultural achievements. Architecture—of the Renaissance as compared to the Baroque—they had assumed boring, they come to find lovely. Plainspoken poets like C.P. Cavafy begin to seem magical in their restraint. The students grow into a kind of *civitas* which is new to them and which they wear a little awkwardly for the first while, but it *is* there. Recently however, the tone has shifted. After a tour of the Colosseum, for instance, instead of the awe that in past years stupefied and admonished the gathered travelers, post-millennial students have barked out dismissive platitudes like "Oh sure, you can build that way if you have slaves," as though the main takeaway from such an historical achievement were a contemporary social justice lesson.

These apply in other situations too, as students are more and more given to sift available historical and aesthetic phenomena into an illustrative role for Big Power contests. A visit to the Galleria Borghese to see Bernini's hauntingly sensitive portrayal of the "Rape of Proserpina" once—and not long ago—provided a lesson in how art connects people across centuries, about how death (as Pluto) comes suddenly, about human powerlessness in the face of natural or divine forces. Now, it becomes a #Metoo meme about a male dominating a female. It's dispiriting. The very art that was meant to challenge preconceived notions about beauty and the good is now used to reinforce them.

An incapacity for wonder hurts students as people obviously, but I think it hurts those in the arts and humanities particularly since a good bit of our work is saying "Isn't that amazing?" and then showing them how it is so. Without an instinct for awe, our work is that much more difficult.

Who You Are

A final challenge, and rather a large one because I think most will not even agree that it *is* a challenge, is a too-great emphasis on the concept of identity. As we have shifted attention, resources, and accolades—and rightly it seems to me—toward what were once marginalized voices, a chorus of squeaking wheels had cried for oil. Results have been mixed. On the one hand, we have greater representation and a greater diversity (measured as race/ethnicity) of text than ever before. On the other, I think we have so stressed the personhood of writers—the privilege of some; the privations of others—that students have managed to come away thinking that authors matter or don't matter mainly due to their sociological status. A writer as brilliant as Zora Neale Hurston is appreciated less for her dazzling prose and generous mind than for her blackness and womanhood. That seems a shame to me because while many possess those latter qualities, very few indeed possess the former. Hurston's gift to the world wasn't merely what she for us represents, but her work, what she made. Convincing students who have been so catechized in identity politics that a person could make something of beauty and worth regardless of their social or economic background is, for those who wish to undertake it, a challenge.

Attention Economy

But for all that, "there [still] lives the dearest freshness deep down [in] things,"[7] which is to say: we have opportunities. One is that a trait in which our majors tend to specialize has just become coin of the realm. Ask any CEO, follow any study of workplace behaviors,[8] and the same prognosis of our national ailment is laid: companies lose more money to unfocused labor that to any other thing. Cal Newport's *Deep Work*[9] describes the problem so completely that I need not belabor the point here, but the fact of modern life is, thanks to cell phones, social media, Big Pharma, or gluten, depending on who you ask, the ability to direct one's attention to a task for long periods of time is suddenly a superpower. Happily, our graduates develop it through constant attention to long and sometimes difficult texts. The opportunity we have is to be explicit about attention as a skillset and not to shy away from assigning big books. If Harry Potter has taught us anything, it is that people will rise to readerly challenge.

Sociability

But actually, Harry Potter taught us something else too that we would do well to preserve: that reading is a social act. Remember the release parties

as those new volumes appeared? Remember the barely constrained urges to discuss plot points with people who hadn't read them yet? I heard "Oh, wait till you get to book five" more times than might have been strictly necessary. I recall seeing fellow passengers on tube in London flipping through a book I'd just finished and smiling to myself as I imagined that part of the story through which they were right then passing.

The reader in the wild tends to be a solitary creature, but it wouldn't hurt for we pedagogues to play up literature's social advantages. Talking to a colleague in the hall the other day, I heard a complaint I'd never considered. Businesses have apparently been grumbling that recent graduates don't know how to work together. A major employer near our campus in Seattle called Amazon—perhaps you've heard of it?—is built around "teams." That's how they talk all the time. No one "has a job," or "works on a project," or "for a department;" they all work on teams. How great must be the shock for our graduates then who have been raised in the most siloed, socially-bankrupt generation in recent memory, maybe in history. The mental health consequences of social dislocation[10] and isolation are so well documented as to be commonplace. We in humanities departments are in a position to help students work together, killing both birds.

Here's what I mean. There's a bar near here that hosts silent reading parties once per month. It's perfect, especially in a town known for being unfriendly. People just show up at the appointed time with their own books and they are seated at a table with a perfect stranger. Usually, the stranger looks up and nods, but sometimes, she keeps right on reading her book and that's fine too. A waiter comes over to whisper whether I'd like a drink. I do. Otherwise, all is silence apart from the turning of pages. It's delightful. We're alone, but we aren't. Why couldn't we have reading parties like that at some faculty member's house? At our campus, we do a reading of scary stories—Edgar Allen Poe and the like—around Halloween, in addition to release parties for the campus literary journal because each of these is an opportunity to help students connect with one another. These are the sorts of soirees the literature refers to as "high-impact learning practices," and our field is full of potential for them. Maybe the trouble is that we've stressed the production of literature along the Virginia Woolf lines—all one needs is a room of one's own—without communicating just how social an affair Woolf's writing actually was. Nearly all the most exciting movements in literary history were gatherings: the Romantics in the Lake District, the Inklings at the Eagle and Child, the Modernists at Cafe Les Deux Magots in the 1920s. "We read to know we are not alone," says the tote-bag; but we have an opportunity to shift it: we read so we won't *be* alone.

Content is King

Walking along the disused train tracks near our campus as I sometimes do between classes is a melancholy affair as I note the infrastructure this city installed for a rail-based future just in time for it to become all but

useless. The canal system in France too was a marvel of engineering and it opened just moments before the bottom of barge-based shipping dropped out. Happily, we have the opposite problem. The numbers of English majors has dropped in recent decades,[11] though they are showing signs of recovery, and they've done so just in time for the world to need our graduates more than ever. The number of magazines and newsletters has exploded. Podcasting—essentially long-form journalism—doubles yearly in terms of listeners and of revenue.[12] The Ecclesiast continues to be right about the making of many books,[13] as sales are up, despite everything, across nearly every sector. Screenwriters are now needed by the legion as what where once a handful of networks with a few prime-time shows has become thousands of channels running twenty-four hour cycles, in addition to on-demand programming which, increasingly, is authored in-house and only available on specific streaming platforms. It is a good time, I am saying, to be in the content creation business.

Books and films and podcasts and news-writing aside, I personally know half a dozen women who make their families' entire living by extolling the virtues of a particular vitamin, and not in some canned marketing jargon, but simply by describing the effects thereof on their skin, emotions, and children in a winsome and memorable way. Opportunities abound just now for those who know their way around a sentence.

Narrative Overdrive

Another sign of hope for our discipline comes not from our graduates' eminent employability, though there is that, but from a subtler cultural shift. A few years ago, *Game of Thrones* (HBO), a multi-year television series made from a set of fantasy novels—about which I know very little—came to a close. When it did, viewers/readers howled that a crime had been committed against the spirit of the books but more importantly against the notion of narrative itself. Articles were published by the dozen with titles such as "The Game of Thrones Finale Is Filled with Plot Holes and Twitter Is Calling Them All Out" and "The Obvious One Reason the 'Game of Thrones' Finale Failed." Now, having never owned a television set, I don't pay much mind to the popular entertainments, but I found these discussions encouraging because they suggest a people with taste and expectations sophisticated enough that deviations from generic boundaries read as offensive, and broadly so. The pushback suggests a populace unwilling to settle for mediocrity especially when it comes to writing. It suggests there are still some artistic standards people will speak up to defend. We want our stories to work. There was a similar fracas over the ending of the Harry Potter books. And one over the *Star Wars* films so vehement that the original creator thereof was dismissed from the director's chair. When the children's film *Frozen* violated one of Dorothy Sayers' rules for detective fiction,[14] switching a main character from hero to villain with a complete absence of narrative support for same—not a clue is given—the writers had to make up for it in

Frozen 2 with a dumbshow acknowledging how silly the reversal was. More recently, an astute article has come out about "The Promise and Failure of WandaVision,"[15] a television show set in the Marvel comic-book universe. The peasantry won't be placated with a few crumbs from the artistic table, it seems. Literary sophistication is on the rise and happily, our students' prospects rise with it.

Shuffling the Chairs

Also, we have a very adaptable subject. Time was, the English major was so strong it could afford to spin off entire disciplines. English courses that studied critical theory and literature relating to women became Women's Studies departments. Reading literature created by or for certain ethnic or racial groups became Black Studies and their ilk. Literature from different languages read in concert became Comparative Literature. Film studies, Narrative Studies, Creative Writing, even Journalism: all these were once comprised—either entirely or in large part—of literature and writing courses offered under the aegis of the English major. Of course the discipline used to be bigger than it is now; we've spun off all its most valuable properties into stand-alone entities.

But not everyone did. Many of those that kept some of these antechapels as part of the department's architecture are still thriving. Others might reattach. Still others can identify and repackage their offerings under these and other headings to great effect. My own department recently doubled in size when we created a Social Justice and Cultural Studies degree track by joining our already extant Middle Eastern, American, and women's literature courses with some history and sociology offerings.

My point here is not to suggest this route, explained more thoroughly in Eric Hayot's "The Humanities Have a Marketing Problem," but to point out that ours is the sort of discipline that has such capability. I do not think there is within the university, a subject so capable of reinventing itself. But to press this advantage to the full, we must be nimble and quick. When the upset surrounding Confederate statuary besieged the national consciousness, I sketched on a cocktail napkin a syllabus that began by reading Byzantine iconoclasts and papal bulls related to public art, sections of G. K. Chesterton's evaluation of Christians and their statues in *Resurrection of Rome*, ending with Robert E. Lee's letters. Why wouldn't we enter and provide direction for, that debate? We are the sort of scholars who can ask questions like: what do we owe the past? For whence does public artwork draw its power? What are we to do with history's monsters? The syllabus stayed on the napkin. Running it through curriculum committee would have taken too long, I reasoned. But what if, when the next great wave washes over, we could catch it? Courses on "Fame"—reading Byron, Hannah More—or on "Plague"—Pepys, Fitzgerald's letters—can be dreamt up in an afternoon. As the O'Shaughnessy poem, and later the fictive confectioner said, "we are the music-makers, and we are the dreamers of the dreams."[16]

For the Love of

Just in time for it to profit me nothing whatsoever, a donor left the English department at my graduate school $6.2 million "for poetry." The benefactress hadn't attended the school, but she loved verse and sought to share that love with others. It isn't the amount of the gift that interests me, though it allows full-ride scholarships to all incoming students in poetry, but the affectionate language. Many donors leave behests to universities, obviously, but usually in service of solving some problem. The gift is utilitarian: maybe we will cure a disease, for instance. But in this case, the gift was, well, a gift, and one motivated by an affection we literary scholars both recognize and share.

Last week as I write this, a student told me she had been talking to her boyfriend, who attends a nearby community college, about our English class and that he said, "I wish I was in that class." This happens all the time. Students ask if they can bring their younger siblings to class just to show them how much fun we have, what college is like. Graduating seniors who haven't had my class in three years write to say that though they ended up business majors, for instance, the English classes they took were their favorite part of their university experience, were the ones that "changed their lives."

I'd be ashamed to share these reflections lest I seem to boast, except that I know they are not unique. Most English professors I know have similar experiences. At the year-end party we throw at the chair's house, I hear students express similar sentiments about classes taken from my colleagues. No, the level of enthusiasm, the response, is not to something I do, but to something we all of us in literary studies do: rather than simply teach them skills, we awaken, many for the first time, their loves. We broaden the sphere of possible pleasures. This—and all the reasons listed above—is why, when I think about the future of literary studies, I'm optimistic.

Notes

1. John Mulaney, *The Comeback Kid*, dir. Rhys Thomas, (2015), TV Special.
2. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), I.ii.366-368.
3. Anthony Abraham Jack, "I Was a Low-Income College Student. Classes Weren't the Hard Part," *New York Times Magazine*, September 10, 2019.
4. Rabih Alameddine, "How to Bartend," in *Best American Essays 2020*, ed. Andre Aciman (Boston: Mariner Books, 2020), 2.
5. See, for one example: Michael Litt, "Why This Tech CEO Keeps Hiring Humanities Majors," *Fast Company*, July 15, 2017.
6. George Herbert, "Love (III)," *George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets* (W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1978).
7. G.M. Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," *Poems and Prose* (Penguin Classics, 1985).
8. Shamsi T. Iqbal ad Eric Horvitz. "Disruption and Recovery of Computing Tasks: Field Study, Analysis, and Directions," in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2007), 677–86.

9. Cal Newport, *Deep Work* (London: Piatkus, 2016).
10. See, for one instance: Nicholas Leigh-Hunt, David Bagguley, Kristin Bash, Victoria Turner, Stephen Turnbull, N. Valtorta, and Woody Caan, "An Overview of Systematic Reviews on the Public Health Consequences of Social Isolation and Loneliness," *Public Health* 152 (2017): 157–71.
11. Kent Cartwright, "Strengthening the Undergraduate English Major: Enrollment Declines and the Problem of Attracting Students," *ADE Bulletin* 154 (2015): 57-61.
12. Or thereabouts; see: Felix Richter, "The Steady Rise of Podcasts," May 26, 2020 (accessed April 19, 2021), https://www.statista.com/chart/10713/podcast-listeners-in-the-united-states/.
13. Ecclesiastes 12:12 (King James Version).
14. Note particularly, the Detection Club oath: "Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God?" For more information, see: Martin Edwards, *The Golden Age of Murder: The Mystery of the Writers Who Invented the Modern Detective Story* (London: HarperCollins, 2015).
15. Leah Libresco Sargeant, "The Promise and Failure of WandaVision," *Mere Orthodoxy*, March 25, 2021.
16. Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy, *Music and Moonlight: Poems and Songs* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1874), 1–5.