English and Englishness

BRIAN DOYLE

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General editor's preface

It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

New Accents is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change; to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest immediately present themselves. In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit. New concepts of literary forms and modes have been proposed; new notions of the nature of literature itself and of how it communicates are current; new views of literature's role in relation to society

flourish. *New Accents* will aim to expound and comment upon the most notable of these.

In the broad field of the study of human communication, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the nature and function of the new electronic media. *New Accents* will try to identify and discuss the challenge these offer to our traditional modes of critical response.

The same interest in communication suggests that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which have begun to involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life. And this will ultimately require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values involved and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Finally, as its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly located in contemporary approaches to language, and a continuing concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to rehearse the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And, while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them; one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

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Introduction: English and popular culture

Fictional worlds

It seems to us perfectly natural that a group of nationally-organized institutions should select, evaluate, interpret, and stockpile a set of verbal fictions and other imaginative forms of language on our behalf; and furthermore that these institutions should provide for us, and for our children and young people, a mould or framework within which to set our experience of, and relation to these symbolic forms.

In this book I shall attempt to show that the contemporary social status and function of certain fictions, including the specialized kind known as English literature, are in actual fact not natural but contingent, and that this contingency is founded upon a long and contradictory history. Indeed, in education as elsewhere, the movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century set many of the mental horizons within which we now operate. It seems that what has become 'second nature' to us is based on the considerable effort of cultural institution-making particularly at the turn of the present century.[1] Since the process of setting up major institutions to channel and stockpile selected fictions was not simply a natural or inevitable phenomenon its apparently self-evident validity can be questioned. Indeed, as will be seen, the actual process of institution-making was historically contradictory and haphazard,

and had consequences which were in many respects unpredicted.

In examining this process, I shall attempt to provide answers to the following questions. Why did such institutions come to exist in the first place? What was, and is, their cultural significance? Are alternatives to these institutions desirable or possible?

I have selected the establishment of the modern discipline of English studies in higher education for particular attention since its institutionalization has been national in a more complete sense than any of the other various processes bearing upon the social channelling of fictions. In contrast to fully or partially market-based institutions such as publishing, the theatre, and the modern media, the institution of English studies in British higher education has achieved a significantly more unchallengeable or 'normalized' status. While it is possible to conceive of a very different set of institutions within the market-place, it is much more difficult to imagine a system of education in England, Britain, or indeed any English-speaking country which is not founded on the teaching of English. Not only is English currently a central element within the curriculum of higher education (and one for which it has become difficult to conceive of a substitute), it stands as a defining feature of 'basic education' or the 'core curriculum' at school level. But this is a recent development. Prior to the major institutional transformations which took place between 1880 and 1920, the situation was very different.[2]

That this work of institutionalization was considerable becomes clear when we look at the apparently unpropitious raw materials initially available for the purpose. Before 1880 most teaching of languages and literature was either associated with women, or allied to the utilitarian pursuit of functional literacy, and therefore occupied a dramatically lower cultural status than the upper-class masculine studies of Classics and Mathematics. Furthermore, although by the nineteenth century the education of upper-class males was carried out largely through the medium of English, the most valued subject matter (intellectual and symbolic) was contained in, or based upon, works in the classical languages of Latin and Greek. During this period, therefore, the very notion of an academic discipline

devoted to the study of English (as opposed to teaching that was incidental to familiarization with the Classics), and especially English literature, would have made little sense within the universities. Looking at the subsequent history one is faced with an unlikely course of events: low status symbolic materials were transformed into a high status discipline which came to occupy a central place within the national curriculum.

In the course of the nineteenth century a fully national system of schooling with predominantly female staff was established throughout Britain. The role given to women within this new national context was itself novel and embodied a conflict of cultural status. There was an unbridgeable gulf between the role of women as homemakers and any professional practice. However, men were unable and unwilling to forge for themselves the kinds of emotional and intellectual skills considered to be necessary to the propagation of 'personal' characteristics among the nation's children. The outcome of this contradictory situation was the establishment of a quasi-maternal semi-profession of the female teacher, rather akin to that of the female nurse. Women teachers were institutionally granted a peculiar capacity for quickening children's personal interests and sense of life-drama, by virtue of what was seen as their instinctive feminine view of the world. With the development of this semi-profession went an investment of value in the teaching of what were called the 'English subjects' (to distinguish them from masculine studies such as Classics). In this way the social use of English literature passed from being a female domestic 'accomplishment' to being a vehicle for the use of female teachers, and thereby also an acceptable element in the teaching of women. The early history of the advanced teaching of English was therefore intimately connected with the entry of women into teaching. It is hardly surprising then that women proved to be not only in a majority within university extension courses in English later in the century, but even that almost all of the students entering the School of English Language and Literature at Oxford (founded in 1893) were female until the First World War (the School was at first given the derisory epithet 'Pink Sunsets' by Oxford men).

In the light of this particular history, subsequent transformations have to be described as remarkable. Thus it is difficult to

accept that this history leads seamlessly towards our present system, as most previous accounts have suggested. It was only as a result of much institutional manoeuvring that this intellectually 'second-rate' group of subjects was gradually specialized into its component parts of History, Geography, and English Language and Literature, and each of these was established as a separate department of 'higher' knowledge with professorial status.[3]

In the case of English this institutional elevation was partially the outcome of a 'national demand' which, while grounded on the progress of female education, paradoxically generated increasing provision by the ancient universities for the study of English by men. Most surprisingly of all, this led an unanticipated challenge to the primacy of Classics within the expanding national system of university education. When looked at more closely, it is clear that the institutionalization of English conformed to a pattern familiar in other professional domains, particularly since the nineteenth century. However, the new professional status for English was not achieved without difficulty. Nor did the difficulties and successes of English conform to the development of other modern disciplines. In terms of its eventually achieved overall influence, at both institutional and symbolic levels, the success of English proved to be more dramatic than that of any other subject. Thus by the 1930s it had become fully established as a professional activity within higher education on terms very different from the semi-professional practice of nineteenth-century women teachers. Instead, as will be seen, it became a distinctively male domain, having its own professional modes of research and teaching and ways of controlling admission.

Histories of English

Existing histories bearing on English studies offer little in the way of an explanation of such momentous changes. Instead they tend to impose upon their materials an artificial homogeneity and continuity. For example, literary histories tend to describe the development of English as a sequence of more or less adequate attempts to achieve a direct response to the literary text, and they ignore the particular character of

English as an institutionalized and gendered pedagogic discipline.[4] There are, fortunately, a small number of somewhat more adequate accounts which recognize something of the momentous nature of these early transformations.[5] Their explanations, however, remain couched in terms of an escape from functional origins of English teaching (as moral indoctrination) to a system of study based upon literary texts which have achieved the capacity to promote free growth within the individual ungendered self. This explanation is far from adequate in that it ignores the continuing, if somewhat altered, social functions of the discipline, and provides no account of the social, cultural, and subjective bases of literary value. It is unable to locate any social dynamic underlying the conditions through which a variety of extremely unlikely 'raw materials' were formed into a central academic discipline with its own highly integrated masculine career structure and professional norms. Furthermore, it fails to relate such norms to the development of a distinctive documentary field (consisting of journals, books, and other patterns of publication), or set of professional associations, range of approved pedagogic activities, and mechanisms for the selection of students.

Histories of pre-university English offer a little more insight into the functional changes that have taken place since the nineteenth century, because of their greater underlying concern with current problems of teaching English to school pupils.[6] They also provide some useful information about changes in regulatory mechanisms, such as examinations, syllabuses, and teaching methods. However, even these accounts attempt in various ways to recoup the 'value' and 'growth' model by presenting the history in terms of comparative difficulties and successes in transmitting to working-class pupils a love of literature. Thus, once again, we find recourse to an account of the progressive liberalization of English as it escaped from its nineteenth-century functional moral shackles and moved closer to the more 'civilized' view often assumed to be typified by Cambridge English since the 1920s.[7] Such Whiggish versions tend to present the history as a series of developmental stages. For example, English in schools is seen as having progressed from a rote language grind, to a stage which involved the transmission of a cultural heritage, and finally advanced to the

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contemporary approach which seeks to encourage in pupils personal growth through experience. Some of the more recent school-based histories have begun to make a significant departure from such developmental approaches, by examining the influence of ideological conflicts within the profession of English teaching upon changes within the discipline.[8] This has allowed the history to be studied in terms of conflicts and compromises at the level of professional consciousness, and has given greater weight to recent challenges to the received assumptions regarding the immanent and inherent value that is said to reside in great literature.

Unfortunately even these histories stop short of examining the relation between the consciousness of professional teachers, and conflicts relating to institutional innovations, state policy, and – most importantly – those wider cultural processes which account for selected fictions having become the object of such large-scale social initiatives in the first place. Interestingly, this limitation can be explained by the genealogy of these same historical accounts. Since they have emerged largely from within English they are shaped in terms of a framework constructed by this discipline itself. Thus they have followed exactly the same cultural divisions, distinctions, and categories of experience that the new discipline propagated and sustained. Furthermore, the acceptance of such received categories has erected firm barriers against the study of the broader social and symbolic relations underlying the dramatic development of the new discipline over the last century or so. Once it had been established as part of a successful modern institution within higher education, English studies excluded from its ambit those wider social processes through which fictions are produced, circulated, and consumed. By legitimizing only the study of 'valuable works', the discipline manufactured an essential and unbridgeable cultural distance between its own sphere of high art and the general domain of popular fiction and discourse.

The altered perspective from which the present account has been written allows us not only to identify the underlying reasons for the gaps within the available writing on the discipline's history, it also calls into question the assumption that English is a perfectly 'normal' and 'natural' field both of cultural production and of study. Indeed, I would suggest that

the historical record reveals complex patterns of social and cultural activity within this field whose centre of gravity has shifted radically on a number of occasions. This perspective conflicts fundamentally with the received account of a homogeneous and unified progression towards a 'mature' area of study. Instead, it has become clear to me that beneath the immediate concerns with language, literature, and criticism, much deeper cultural forces have been mobilized in the name of the study of English. If we are to examine these forces we must, as Raymond Williams points out, attend to *all* of the practices that have made up English, including those we have learned to view as marginal.[9] We can begin, as he does, by extending our conception of literature to encompass all 'discourse by writing'. But a further broadening of emphasis is required in order to identify a range of practices of which 'literature' itself, even when defined in this extended manner, is only one kind of example. This takes our analysis well beyond the received discipline-based constraints of English.

A social history of fictions

Perry Anderson's influential essay 'components of the national culture',[10] offers some insight into the processes by which particular forms of discourse, including fictions, have been nationally organized or channelled. Anderson traces the success of English to a factor which he sees as characteristic of wider patterns of cultural hegemony in Britain. In his view, it is the capacity of English studies to articulate systematically a symbolic rather than theoretical totality that has enabled the discipline to occupy a central role in sustaining the 'national culture'. While this accounts at an extremely general level for the discipline's ideological success, the value of Anderson's essay is limited by the narrowness of the conception of 'culture' with which he works. This leads him to treat academic disciplines as if they constituted the 'national culture' as a whole, rather than cultural institutions with a specific kind of national orientation. As applied more carefully by Francis Mulhern,[11] this form of analysis provides a way of understanding how English, as a professionally-chartered discourse on literature, has mediated the entry of a new social layer into the national

intelligentsia. But while representing a considerable advance upon those accounts which treat the history of English simply as a history of literature and criticism, Mulhern's book is primarily concerned with the *Scrutiny* movement, and as such tells us little about the discipline's characteristic institutional orientations to nationality, professionalism, and particularly gender. This national dimension has however received some attention elsewhere. According to Macherey and Balibar,[12] a central feature of this kind of nationally-orientated cultural institution is the propagation and maintenance of a sense of an 'imaginary' national educated language made manifest in a set of 'high' fictional discourses. English can thus be seen as an institutionalized set of academic and schooling practices which function to process, evaluate, and transmit works esteemed as having 'cultural value', and – by the same token – to determine which forms of discourse are to count simply as 'ordinary' language and popular fiction. Nevertheless, they fail to note that such educational practices in turn form a part of a broader historical process of the social channelling of fictions.

Such work on national and cultural institutions has important implications since it enables us to understand the history of English studies as an aspect of the wider social production and regulation of fictions. It also allows us to determine the exact nature of the radical gulf between 'vulgar' fictions and a transcendental realm of 'literature' which the discipline of English has played a central part in sustaining. But perhaps we should begin by touching on a central social issue to which the discipline itself oddly enough has paid scant attention: the general role of fictions in society. It seems likely that formal arrangements for the production, circulation, and consumption of verbal fictions (such as stories and other imaginative uses of language) are to be found in all societies. English studies can be seen as but one set of institutions and networks for the channelling of verbal imagining or fiction making. The history of the institutionalization of English can then be understood in terms of larger reorientations of the social functions of fiction making.

In looking at the history from this broader social perspective it is impossible to follow most writers on the subject in separating the social history of English from a history of the power relations involved in symbolic forms. Furthermore, even a brief

discussion of the power of symbolic forms requires some general account of the social history of the major types of social network for channelling fictions. Following Attali's account of music,[13] fictions (whether simply narrated, performed or silently read) can be understood as socially-coded types of fantasy. The probably universal social fascination with stories, narratives, and other heightened or ritualized uses of language is related to their capacity to terrify and to harmonize, to act as a symbolic weapon as well as a force for exaltation and transcendence, blasphemy and curse as well as therapy and cure. The overall social importance of fiction making is based upon its ability to engage in symbolic transformations, such as the transformation of anxiety into joy, dissonance into harmony. Indeed through such symbolic transformations, fictions affirm that social order is possible. Thus, a fundamental use value of fictions is their capacity for creating community and reconciliation.

By the same token the social possibilities of fictions render them of interest to those who wield or seek power. Fictional forms have always been put to political uses, and often in ways which alienate the fictions from their basic sources and transform their social value. Attempts to regulate fiction making and consumption seem to arise at an early stage of the implementation of any new order of power, and such attempts may indeed tend towards the achievement of monopoly control. Such appropriations can never be total however, since even politically-harmonized fictional forms are subject to symbolic fragmentation by virtue of their basis in potentially disordered fantasies. My concern here though is more directly with the 'external' or social and cultural influences on the regulation of the making and interpretation of fictions.

It is by now well established that historically different senses of 'culture' relate to different modes of socialization or 'cultivation'. Thus, the lessening during the sixteenth century of the sense of 'worship' associated with the term 'culture' signifies how the process of human cultivation was coming to be associated with processes of social 'breeding' or 'government' (often by means of domestic tuition), rather than ritual.[14] This contained the seeds of a new social relation between fiction making and power, at first through the elevation of selected vernacular forms as suitable for 'breeding' (albeit often only of a 'lighter'

kind), and later through the gradual influence of money upon the production, circulation, and use of vernacular 'literature'. The Tudor assimilation of diverse public forms of government to centralized administration and control had encouraged the development of the first truly national sense of country and tongue, at least among the governing classes. This in turn generated a whole sequence of attempts at establishing a 'ruled' or cultured vernacular language tailored to a national system of administration and communication, and the model of the esteemed classical languages of Greece and Rome. 'Literature' came to be understood as limited to those forms of writing which, in their role as 'handmaidens' of the national tongue, were considered to contribute to the classicization process.

Education and modern rhetoric

As relations of money exchange came to predominate, an economic relation based on remuneration for the sale of labour gradually became more generally available to the moulder of fictions. The 'Literary Work' emerged as an object from which an income could be drawn, and patronage now stood as but one among a number of possible economic ties (financial, capitalist, and feudal).[15] At the level of consumption, the autonomous status conferred on literary works by their institutionalization as commodities, was supported by the systematic propagation of new modes of reading. Prescriptions for reading and writing were eventually formally articulated under the rubric of modern rhetoric and *belles-lettres*. An economic as well as cultural network was thereby established which partially simulated ritual community. The literary work was valorized as a symbolic contribution to the maintenance of a harmonious 'high society'. Participation in this literary culture helped sustain the social belief in the reality of a civilization or culture guaranteed by rational exchange rather than worship. As this representational or early capitalist economy progressively broke down the residual networks of ritual and patronage, works of modern English rhetoric and *belles-lettres*, or 'literature', came to be experienced as representing the harmony and order of cultured or 'polite' society, and in this way helped to legitimize by symbolic and fictional means the whole system of power, status,

and exchange. In addition, the institutionalization of the literary work as an immaterial commodity enabled merchants to exercise control over literary production, sell its usage, and develop a large pool of customers. In this process the author of literary works (if not of the wider range of 'vulgar' fictions), became an independent entrepreneur offering desirable symbolic commodities to those wishing to develop the kinds of taste required to participate in polite society.

It is this process which underlies the earliest systematic institutionalization of forms of education using vernacular literary works. The teaching of 'Rhetoric and *Belles-Lettres*' was established at first at the margins of power and status in Scotland and the English Dissenting Academies, and eventually found a place in the curriculum of the first English utilitarian college (University College, London, founded in the 1820s) as 'English Language and Literature'.[16] And when university colleges were founded in provincial cities later in the nineteenth century, some provision was usually made for instruction in 'English and History'. Also, from the moment of the establishment in the 1830s of King's College, London as a specifically religious alternative to the utilitarian University College, a much greater emphasis was placed on the role of the 'English subjects' in countering the morally impoverished aspects of Enlightenment rationality. Indeed, the opposition between rationalistic enlightenment and anti-utilitarian moralism came to be inscribed within literary works themselves in the course of the century. From an anti-utilitarian romantic-conservative viewpoint the literary work embodied the values of human relationship and thus transcended exchange value: literature seemed to preserve inspirational, ritual value.

This had particular importance for the social, domestic, and pedagogic links that were forged between women and literature. A strong moral emphasis was to be found in the influential body of writings on female education produced during the eighteenth century. In such writings, vernacular and literary studies were proposed as particularly fitted for women. Despite the development of a 'modern' English form of rhetoric and *belles-lettres*, familiarity with classical knowledge and taste continued to mark out the cultured role of 'gentleman', whereas the cultivation of women could conveniently be restricted to selected

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