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Literary Studies and the Academy

David Goldie

In 1885 the University of Oxford invited applications for the newly-created Merton Professorship of English Language and Literature. The holder of the chair was, according to the statutes, to ‘lecture and give instruction on the broad history and criticism of English Language and Literature, and on the works of approved English authors’. This was not in itself a particularly innovatory move, as the study of English vernacular literature had played some part in higher education in Britain for over a century. Oxford university had put English as a subject into its pass degree in 1873, had been participating since 1878 in Extension teaching, of which literary study formed a significant part, and had since 1881 been setting special examinations in the subject for its non-graduating women students. What was new was the fact that this ancient university appeared to be on the verge of granting the solid academic legitimacy of an established chair to an institutionally marginal and often contentious intellectual pursuit, acknowledging the study of literary texts in English to be a fit subject not just for women and the educationally disadvantaged but also for university men. English Studies had earned some respectability through the work of various educational establishments in the years leading up to this, but now, it seemed, it was about to be embraced by the Academy – an impression recently confirmed by England’s other ancient university, Cambridge, which had incorporated English as a subject in its Board for Medieval and Modern Languages in 1878. Several well-qualified literary scholars recognized the significance and prestige attached to this development by putting themselves forward for the Oxford chair, among

them A. C. Bradley, John Churton Collins, Edward Dowden, Edmund Gosse, and George Saintsbury. It was even rumoured that Matthew Arnold might find himself appointed to the position.

In the end, though, Oxford chose not to appoint a literary scholar after all. In a gesture that betrayed a common anxiety about the academic validity of English literary studies the university chose instead a Teutonic philologist, A. S. Napier – a rather perverse decision, perhaps, given that Napier had very little taste for any literature after Chaucer and that the university already had a number of chairs devoted to linguistic and philological subjects, among them Celtic, Comparative Philology, and Anglo-Saxon. Though the literary study of English had been set back, it could not, in the longer term, be denied. The Oxford decision actually prompted a public controversy in which the subject's advocates were able to state and develop their case. This was the first time that a sustained and systematic argument had been made for a subject that had hitherto developed in an often rather piecemeal fashion. The appearance of John Churton Collins's *The Study of English Literature: A Plea for Its Recognition and Organization at the Universities* (1891) and A. C. Bradley's *The Teaching of English Literature* (1891) marked the beginning of a new self-conscious debate about pedagogy and English literature that was joined by, among others, Walter Raleigh's *The Study of English Literature* (1900) and the pamphlet publications of the English Association (founded in 1907), and which culminated its first phase in the report of the Newbolt Commission, *The Teaching of English in England* (1921). This developing case for English proved persuasive, even in the fastnesses of the ancient universities. By 1894 Oxford had established a School of English and had, in the following year, begun its renowned B.Litt.

in English. In 1904 it converted the Merton Professorship into a Chair of English Literature. Cambridge took a little longer to come round, setting up its first literature chair in 1911 and eventually establishing its English Tripos in 1917.

It would be wrong to see all of these developments as comprising the foundational moment in the history of English Studies; Brian Doyle, for one, has rightly warned against taking too Oxbridge-centred an approach to this history.¹ But they were potentially a defining factor. The arguments of the 1880s and 1890s, and the subsequent work of the early practitioners of English Studies, began the process of moulding a fluid and often unstable subject into the shape it would hold for much of the following century. The fact that academic English was granted its seal of approval at this particular moment is significant too. For this was a time in which English culture was undergoing a ‘nationalization’, with the formation of diverse national cultural institutions such as the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the National Trust, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The new academic discipline of English literature, emerging from the shadows of continental models, suited well this nationalizing mood. One of the most influential nineteenth-century historians of English literature, the Frenchman Hippolyte Taine, had made the connection between literature and national character the central argument of his four-volume *History of English Literature* (1863-4), describing his research into English

¹ Brian Doyle, 'The Hidden History of English Studies' in Peter Widdowson (ed.), *Re-Reading English* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 18.

literary history as the ‘search for the psychology of a people’.² And this prompt would be followed by many of the first practitioners of academic English literature, among them Henry Morley, who believed that ‘the full mind of a nation is its literature’ and that ‘to a true history of the literature of any country must belong a distinct recognition of the national character that underlies it’.³ The general effect, as Stefan Collini has noted, amounted to a ‘Whig reinterpretation of English literature’ in which the national literature swiftly acquired a continuous, discrete history and a place very near the centre of the national consciousness.⁴

This literary-critical Whiggism would increasingly marginalise a somewhat inconvenient truth, namely that much of its inspiration derived from continental Europe. English literary critics had long sought models from classical and modern continental literatures, and in the nineteenth century Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold were only the two most prominent of many contemporary examples. Carlyle’s stylistic and substantive debt to the philosophy of Kant and Fichte and the writing of Goethe, Schiller, and Novalis was apparent in a number of his early works, from the *Life of Friedrich Schiller* (1823-4) to *Sartor Resartus* (1836). These writings indicted the perceived

² ‘J’entreprends ici d’écrire l’histoire d’une Literature et d’y chercher la psychologie d’un peuple’, H. Taine, *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise*, 4 vols (Paris: Librairie de L. Hachette & Cie, 1863), vol. I, pp. iii-xlvi.

³ Henry Morley, *English Writers: An Attempt Towards a History of English Literature*, 11 vols. (London: Cassell & Co., 1887), vol. I, p. 1.

⁴ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 47.

intellectual and moral slackness of English empiricism, and to Carlyle, at least, European thought seemed an ideal stick with which to beat it. Elements of this attitude were also to be found, albeit expressed more felicitously, in Arnold's writing. Arnold's later *Essays in Criticism* (1865) was one of the most significant works of nineteenth-century English criticism but it rarely lingered long on English literary subjects. The book covered a range of topics from Marcus Aurelius and Spinoza to Heinrich Heine, Maurice and Eugénie de Guérin; where it discussed English writers at all, however, it tended to place them in unflattering comparison to their continental counterparts. In education, as in literature and criticism, it was to the East of the English Channel that Arnold looked for his lead, seeing both a superior pedagogy and a more enabling structure of academies, through which the British might be educated out of their inveterate philistinism.

Through the work of critics like Carlyle and Arnold, continental philosophy, literature, and criticism were still widely influential and in some ways actually constituted the models for, and the basis of, much modern English criticism. Though the German Romantic influences associated with Carlyle waned as the century progressed, Arnold ensured that the ideas of critics and philosophers such as Sainte-Beuve and Renan had a wider dissemination in the English-speaking world and would continue to resonate within both criticism and the academy. In criticism, the legacy was a continued engagement with European, particularly French, literature that would animate both Symbolism and Modernism and which was immediately apparent in the work of extramural critics such as Arthur Symonds, T. S. Eliot, John Middleton Murry, and Ezra Pound. Similar engagement was also to be found within the walls of the developing English academy, giving the new 'nationalized' discipline an occasional cosmopolitan

flavour. In between writing copiously on English writers, for example, George Saintsbury would find time to publish, among several other works on French subjects, *A Short History of French Literature* (1882) and *Essays on French Novelists* (1891); and Edward Dowden, Professor of English literature at Trinity College, Dublin produced *A History of French Literature* (1897). Even an academic critic as bluff in his Englishness as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch could still draw on an Arnoldian worldliness to ask his Cambridge students rhetorically why they shouldn't 'treat our noble inheritance of literature and language as scrupulously, and with as high a sense of their appertaining to our national honour, as a Frenchman cherishes *his* language, *his* literature?'⁵

Notwithstanding these examples, the trend of English academic criticism was inexorably towards a more insular reading of the national tradition – a trend that would be accelerated by the literary chauvinism engendered by the First World War and reinforced by the Newbolt Commission.⁶ It was as a decisively 'national' subject that academic English literary criticism moved from being a peripheral activity with little establishment recognition to one of the key disciplines, in which the nation could index its every mood and characteristic.

Before the controversy surrounding the Merton chair is examined, however, it is worth taking stock of the way academic English had developed up to this point, not only

⁵ Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, 'On a School of English', in *On the Art of Reading: Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge 1916-17* (Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 113.

⁶ See, for example, Quiller-Couch's two essays 'Patriotism in English Literature' in *Studies in Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1918), pp. 290-322.

in the realm of the university but in the often much more dynamic branches of education that lay beneath it. To understand the doubts of Oxford, as well as other centres of education, that English Studies was not quite a proper subject for its undergraduates, it is necessary first to examine the subject's tangled beginnings and uneven development.

Literacy and Elementary Education

The academic discipline of English Studies can, as D. J. Palmer had shown, be traced back a century and more before this point.⁷ While the English grammar school and university traditions continued, in the spirit of the Renaissance, to construe Greek and Latin as the exclusive, authentic discourses of linguistic and humanistic learning, English had in the eighteenth century begun, albeit very slowly, to exert its own claims to academic legitimacy. Dissenting academies, with their emphasis on practicality and useful learning, recognized the English language as a proper medium of academic discourse and approached English texts as worthwhile subjects of study. An exemplar of such an approach was Philip Doddridge, founder of the Northampton Academy in 1729, who – unusually for the time - lectured in English, and who encouraged the stylistic and literary study of English texts. The Scottish universities, similarly committed to a largely practical pedagogy, had likewise made the study of English texts a central part of their humanities curricula. Frances Hutcheson, who became Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University in 1730, began the trend by delivering his lectures in English. He

⁷ D. J. Palmer, *The Rise of English Studies: An Account of the Study of English Language and Literature from its Origins to the Making of the Oxford English School* (London: University of Hull, 1965), pp. 1-14.

was followed by, among others, Hugh Blair at Edinburgh. Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), a series of talks delivered originally at Edinburgh University, marked this emphasis in its willingness to draw exemplary materials from both ancient and modern vernacular literatures. The book became one of the best-known early works of academic literary criticism, and would be used as a textbook in literary education for over a hundred years.

While such innovation was unimaginable in England's grammar schools and two ancient universities, English Studies – largely in the form of elementary literacy teaching – began, in the early nineteenth century, to become a matter of increasing concern. For educators like Doddridge and Blair, English was not so much a replacement for Classical humanities as a more direct route to the same end – an effective means of promoting the cultured, discriminating individualism on which Classical liberal humanism was predicated. The emphasis for elementary educationalists in the early nineteenth century was, however, necessarily different. The pressing need to educate a growing, and sometimes restive, urban population – to develop the literacy skills and basic education required of a dynamic, industrial society – tended to shift pedagogical emphasis away from disinterested notions of individual development to more pragmatic ones related to social organization and economic planning. And as the state took hold of what would become a national elementary education system in the first half of the nineteenth-century it found in English a subject that was not only more accessible and immediately relevant than Classics but which might also combine instruction in basic literacy with an education in national values. For the utilitarian educational reformer Henry Brougham, 'the function of reform was to strengthen the English social structure, not to enrich

people's intellectual or emotional lives.'⁸ To foster literacy, according to this view, was to dissipate the potential for mobbing and rebellion among the working classes and to turn them instead into responsible subjects.

Similar debates were taking place across the Channel. In France education had, during the revolutions and restorations of the first half of the nineteenth century, been a battleground between the claims of Church and state. The state took increasing control through a number of measures. It had gained an effective monopoly on all levels of education with Napoleon's foundation of the Imperial University in 1806 (partially undone as a consequence of the Falloux laws of 1850-51); and it had attempted to establish compulsory attendance at primary schools in 1816 (achieved under the Ferry laws of 1881-2 which made attendance at primary schools both compulsory and free). It thereby ensured that the ends served by elementary national education were those of what Rousseau had termed the *volonté general*, the general will, over individual personal development, with an emphasis on the creation of national linguistic uniformity and social and economic utility.⁹ While English education remained essentially voluntary and sporadic in its provision before 1870, French education had become, in intention at least, a rationalized arm of national policy. The nation's elementary education was notionally, and then during the Second Republic actually, compulsory for all, while secondary

⁸ Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 143.

⁹ Michalina Vaughan and Margaret Scotford Archer, *Social Conflict and Educational Change in England and France 1789-1848* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 117-30.

schooling remained the preserve of the bourgeoisie, espousing a liberal ethos but being largely dedicated to the vocational training of professionals, teachers, and administrators who might serve the state and the national economy. At these higher levels there was some scope for literary study, especially after 1852 when senior pupils in *lycées*, following four years of a general humanities and sciences education, were given the opportunity to study for either a science or a literary *baccalauréat* that contained elements of French and foreign literatures alongside history, geography, and a little Latin.¹⁰

Though the French were well ahead of the English in terms of providing education and vernacular literary study, they were behind the Germans, particularly the pre-unification states of Prussia and Bavaria. Though these states generally promoted a more liberal education than that found in England and France, especially before 1871, that education was, at an elementary level, less dedicated to enabling social mobility or individual realization than developing the strength of the state, largely through its appropriation of Herder's ideas of the *Volk*. Both attendance and literacy rates in German schools were conspicuously higher than those in French and English schools, with Prussia having an adult literacy rate of 80% by 1850.¹¹ While the principal aim of the extensive and well-funded network of elementary *Volksschulen* was to engender basic literacy and the applied skills crucial to a developing local rural economy and

¹⁰ Joseph N. Moody, *French Education since Napoleon* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1978), p. 62.

¹¹ Karl A. Schleunes, *Schooling and Society: the Politics of Education in Prussia and Bavaria 1750-1900* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), p.109.

increasingly to the wider industrial economy, German elementary education would also play an important part in creating a national consciousness that was crucial to the process of unification in 1871 and which was expressed with full force in 1914. As such, a limited amount of literary and cultural education, especially where it served the ends of nation-building, was embedded at lower levels of German education.

Nineteenth-century German educational culture was pervaded, however, by a countervailing burden of *Bildung*, a notion of self-realisation and self-perfection that is commonly associated with the theorist and administrator who founded the Prussian education system, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Schooled in German Idealism, and influenced by the ideas of self-formation articulated by the third earl of Shaftesbury and Rousseau, Humboldt was intimate with Goethe and Schiller and with the philosophy and literary culture of Weimar. His resulting educational philosophy, one that emphasized the development of a Kantian *Selbstbewußtsein* or self-assurance, played down vocationalism and the immediate economic needs of the state. These traits were most evident in the creation of the modern Prussian *Gymnasium*, a secondary school that placed a strong emphasis on the learning of modern languages and German language and culture alongside classical and mathematical studies. At tertiary level the Humboldtian legacy was expressed most forcefully in the new university of Berlin (1810), particularly in the application by Friedrich Schleiermacher – appointed by Humboldt to the university’s foundation committee - of hermeneutics to a more general understanding of self in society, and in the articulation by the university’s first *Rektor*, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, of a *Nationalerziehungsplan* – a national plan of education based on a concept of *Selbständigkeit* or true personal independence.

German education would change its character significantly in the latter part of the nineteenth-century as a consequence of unification, moving away from its promulgation of a disinterested idealism towards a more focused vocational and scientific technical education. For much of the century, though, it was divided between a disinterested and often socially-insulated secondary and tertiary system embracing philology, history, and the general propagation of *Kultur* through the working of *Bildung*, and an elementary education that promoted above all the development of basic literacy and practical skills and which had, until its focus shifted towards the cultural knowledge needed for *Volksbildung*, little place for the development of literary skills.

Though as the century progressed, English education travelled somewhat in the opposite direction -- from the vocational and controlling to the cultural and emancipator - - what it had in common with France and Germany at its elementary levels was the aim of increasing literacy without necessarily building the independent literary and critical thinking that might create articulate dissent. State-sponsored academic English, then, was largely restricted in its nineteenth-century beginnings to functional, linguistic study. Earlier notions of the subject as a humanizing, literary discipline were relegated to a secondary status. The consequence of this was that schoolchildren in all but the best of private schools were exposed to a very limited range of reading material. Often one book, the English Bible, encompassed the beginning and end of their literary and linguistic education. After the 1840s, some voluntary schools supplemented the Bible with a school reader, but the quality of such readers left much to be desired - especially to school inspectors such as Matthew Arnold who had close knowledge of educational developments on the continent. Arnold wrote angrily in his report for 1860 that these

books, filled with either ‘dry scientific disquisitions’ or ‘literary compositions of an inferior order’ promoted a ‘grave and discouraging deficiency in anything like literary taste and feeling’. The result, he wrote, was that the average school student ‘has, except his Bible, no literature, no *humanizing* instruction at all’.¹² Other educationalists however, were more tentative in their endeavours towards the teaching of vernacular literature. In his contribution on ‘The Teaching of English’ to the influential *Essays on a Liberal Education* (1867), J. W. Hales was plainly not able to go as far as Arnold.¹³ Hales was perhaps as liberal as Arnold in spirit (he was the Professor of English at Bedford College for Women) but in practice his principal concern was to establish the English language at the centre of liberal education in place of the classics. Like many other university academics of the time, his first aim was to foster systematic study and inculcate confident usage of the vernacular language, which meant that the study of literature, for all its liberalizing possibilities, was reduced to an ancillary role.

Some steps were taken towards a more Arnoldian position, among them the introduction to schools in 1871 of the new subject of ‘English Literature’, which seemed explicitly to shift emphasis away from straightforward linguistic instruction towards a more complex, culturally-freighted literary education. Within ten years this became the most popular school subject, prompting a spate of literary histories, primers, and other

¹² Peter Smith and Geoffrey Summerfield (eds.), *Matthew Arnold and the Education of the New Order: a Selection of Arnold's Writings on Education* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 214-5.

¹³ J. W. Hales, 'The Teaching of English' in F. W. Farrar (ed.), *Essays on a Liberal Education* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1867), pp. 293-312.

critical books designed to help students pass its examinations. But in practice, the subject that had promised humane, liberal learning was – partly as a consequence of the regime of examination and payment by results introduced by the Revised Code of 1862 – threatening to become just another educational grinding mill. Some efforts were made to alter this, for example, the Mundella code of 1883 which attempted to enlarge the scope of literary education, empowering inspectors to test the more able senior pupils on standard authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, Goldsmith, Lamb, Cowper, Scott, Wordsworth, Byron, and Macaulay. But the battle for a distinct literary, as opposed to a straightforward linguistic, education was still nowhere near a satisfactory conclusion.¹⁴

The higher reaches of secondary education before the 1870s were similarly restricted in their study of English literature. The teaching of humanities in the public schools, as the Clarendon Commission Report of 1864 showed, retained its emphasis on the study of the classics. English literature, it was felt, was a leisure activity better suited to private perusal than classroom analysis. The Taunton Commission into endowed grammar schools of 1865-7 similarly found little evidence in those schools of formal teaching in English literature, but in contrast to the complacencies of the Clarendon Commission, concluded that this was a state of affairs that ought to be changed. The commissioners noted the decline of Latin and Greek in the grammar schools and proposed that England follow the examples of continental Europe in basing a national literature on the study of vernacular writing. This teaching, in addition, should not be restricted to rhetoric or philology: according to the commission's summary report, 'the true purpose of teaching English literature' was not 'to find material with which to teach

¹⁴ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, pp. 160-61.

English grammar, but to kindle a living interest in the learner's mind, to make him feel the force and beauty of which the language is capable, to refine and elevate his taste.'¹⁵ This recommendation was very high-minded and recognized the need for the development of critical as well as practical literary skills, but it is a moot point whether such educational reform came near to developing the intended critical responsiveness in many school pupils. Into the early twentieth century most Elementary pupils and trainee teachers continued to learn their literature by rote, making the study of literature as much a test of memory as of critical responsiveness.

Further and Higher Education

The growing educational endorsement of English studies, with a slow but rising emphasis on the humanizing potential of literary education rather than the discipline of linguistic study, was progressive and undoubtedly contributed to the subject's increasing popularity. The subject might be derided from time to time as a lower-status substitute for the Classics, but this in fact proved to be its great strength. For the rising lower-middle and upper-working classes created by the century's economic development and attendant political reform, literary study offered a legitimizing and confidence-building means of access to culture: it was, in a sense, a rational democratic equivalent to the hierarchical Classical model. This may have escaped the attention of the ancient universities, but it had been recognised by the higher education institutions that had sought, from earlier in the century, to widen educational participation. The Mechanics' Institutes which had

¹⁵ *Taunton Commission I*, pp. 25-6, quoted in *The English Common Reader*, p. 183.

sprung up from the 1820s and which numbered well over 500 by 1850, had been established to bring practical education to aspiring members of the working class. These institutions had at first been suspicious of literary studies, just as the Public Libraries movement, which effectively began in 1849, had been wary of stocking library shelves with literature rather than more practical and ostensibly improving books.¹⁶ But, in practice, these institutions and the Working Men's Colleges that followed quickly found the benefit of placing literary teaching nearer the centre of their curricula, especially when literature was construed, as it increasingly was in schools, as an accessible repository of both moral and national values and a humanizing complement to technical subjects. Figures such as F. D. Maurice, Professor of English Literature and History at King's College (1840-53) and from 1854 principal of the London Working Men's College, brought an evangelical zeal to this task, emphasizing the inspirational qualities of vernacular literature and broadening the academic constituency to working-class men and middle-class women. This constituency, especially that of women, assumed an increasingly role in the development of English literary study. Maurice had been one of the founders of Queen's College for Women in 1848, that would be followed by Bedford College in the following year, and then later, starting with Girton in 1869, by the women's colleges of London, Oxford, and Cambridge in the 1870s and 1880s. These later developments were the product of a noticeable surge of interest in middle-class female education in the late 1860s, which had prompted the establishing, especially in the

¹⁶ J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd: Popular Culture in England 1750-1900* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), *The English Common Reader*, pp. 126-7.

north of England, of a number of women's educational associations.¹⁷ These, in turn, directly inspired the University Extension movement which after 1873 quickly spread across England, encouraging the founding of the new university colleges in regional cities such as Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Liverpool, and Manchester. Women students tended to predominate in extension lectures – one contemporary account estimated that they formed two-thirds of extension classes at Oxford in 1888-89 – and although they were less well-represented in the university colleges their influence was felt strongly.¹⁸ That influence, as it pertained to the study of English literature, was both practical and moral: English was both an easier alternative to the Classics, needing little preliminary linguistic schooling, and a suitable subject for the female's supposedly less rational, more instinctive faculties. Such, at least, were the arguments put forward by Charles Kingsley in his introductory lecture to his female students as Professor of English at Queen's College. 'God' he told his students, 'intended woman to look instinctively at the world', and that as a consequence a literary education might not only 'quicken women's inborn *personal interest*' but also develop 'that woman's heart' that would 'help to deliver man from bondage to his own tyrannous and all-too-exclusive

¹⁷ See John Dixon, *A Schooling in 'English': Critical Episodes in the Struggle to Shape Literary and Cultural Studies* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 14-17; and Stuart Marriott, *University Extension Lecturers: The organisation of Extramural Employment in England, 1873-1914* (University of Leeds, 1985), pp. 2-4.

¹⁸ June Purvis, *A History of Women's Education in England* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), *The English Common Reader*, pp. 110.

brain'.¹⁹ The study of English literature in such a context almost inevitably tended to stress empathetic response over critical analysis. As one of the most influential extension lecturers Richard Moulton put it, 'sympathy is the grand interpreter'.²⁰

The belief that English literature was, to use Chris Baldick's phrase, 'a civilizing subject', that might help bring a measure of Classical sweetness and light to the previously educationally disadvantaged and perhaps instill in them a sense of social responsibility and political moderation, made it a powerful presence in adult education (as well as in the programmes of the more practical 'provincial' universities of London, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales).²¹ But it was plainly not to its advantage in the ancient universities, where the subject's accessibility and lack of formal rigour made it suspect. From this point of view English literature might be suitable as a recreation but not as a discipline: 'To mix up the study of a subject which was enthusiastically argued around undergraduate study fires with subjects suitable to be set for examinations, to make Work-matter out of a fascinating spare-time hobby, was', as Stephen Potter would later put it, 'against academic nature.'²²

¹⁹ Charles. Kingsley, 'On English Literature', in *Introductory Lectures, Delivered at Queen's College, London* (London: John W. Parker, 1849), pp. 58-9.

²⁰ Quoted in Dixon, *A schooling in 'English'*, p. 38.

²¹ See Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 59-85.

²² Stephen Potter, *The Muse in Chains: a Study in Education* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), pp. 169.

The first generation of full-time university English teachers, then, were the inheritors of a subject that had a clear social and educational purpose, but a less well-defined set of critical and scholarly objectives. In order to make the subject grow (and often to secure their salaries) they had to enthrall the imaginations of substantial numbers of students, but in order to make 'academic nature' more amenable to their subject they had to ensure that the subject conformed to conventional notions of scholarship and pedagogy. Such pressures were bound to have an impact on the work of the early academic specialists in English literature, many of whom brought the additional complication of having come to the academy through careers in literary journalism. Negotiating between the demands of establishing and popularizing a new discipline, producing literary criticism, and engaging in original literary scholarship was one of the main challenges they faced.

Two of the early figures faced with these differing roles, David Masson and Henry Morley, were successive Professors of English Language and Literature at University College, London. As a critic, Masson wrote penetratingly about contemporary authors, among them Dickens and Thackeray, as well as producing scholarly disquisitions on Milton; as an editor he published and helped establish the reputations of Thomas Hughes, Charles Kingsley and others. During this time he had been appointed to the Chair of English Language and Literature at University College, a position he held from 1852. He was the first wholly successful holder of this chair and during his tenure the study of English language and literature became established in 1859 as an integral part of the syllabus. Masson left in 1865 to take up the Chair in Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh university, the position originally held by Hugh Blair and which

became renamed on his appointment as the Chair of Rhetoric and English Literature. He was effectively the first person to build a full-time career as a university teacher of English literature, spending forty-three years publishing academic and critical works, lecturing, and designing curricula for the new subject. In the year that Oxford was making its first tentative steps towards establishing an honours school Masson was a veteran, confidently putting Edinburgh students (who were required to show this knowledge in order to graduate with their general MA Arts degrees) through their paces in an impressive range of literary texts from Chaucer to Tennyson.²³

Much of Masson's criticism is, like that of the other early professionals in academic English studies, broadly historical and evaluative, involving the marking out of the main lines in the development of English literature and making tentative classifications. On the one hand his work involves the skills of the critic and biographer, seen for example in the lectures collected posthumously as *Shakespeare Personally* (1914) and in *Carlyle: Personally in his Writings* (1885), in which he follows that writer in locating literary style as much in individual sensibility as historical circumstance, typically, for example, noting the 'moral element in Carlyle's constitution' that gave his work 'its special character of originality'.²⁴ On the other hand he exhibits the more academic impulse to historicise and categorise, evident in *British Novelists and their*

²³ See Jo McMurtry, *English Language, English Literature: The Creation of an Academic Discipline* (London: Mansell, 1985), pp. 128-31 for a detailed description of this curriculum for 1883.

²⁴ David Masson, *Carlyle: Personally and in his Writings* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1885), p. 66.

Styles (1859), in which Masson constructs a developmental history of the genre and then sifts contemporary novels to identify thirteen distinct modes, an early attempt to fix the flux of contemporary artistic practice into a communicable, teachable system.²⁵ In much of his writing Masson can be seen to be balancing the competing demands of criticism and scholarship, satisfying the academic reader with a cumulus of fact while remaining sensitive to the individual human element – the ‘Imagination’ as Masson figures it – that evades systemic determination and finds fugitive expression in the singular work of literary art. This combination is visible in the work on Milton for which he is probably best known, his three-volume *The Poetical Works of John Milton* (1890), with its massive apparatus of introductions, memoirs, notes, and essays; and his six-volume *The Life of John Milton: Narrated in Connexion with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of His Time* (1859-1880). This latter (with its seventh-volume index added in 1894) amounted to over 4,500 pages of unprecedentedly detailed examination of Milton’s historical contexts. It was a work, as Masson put it in his preface, that might stand as a ‘History of his Time’; but it was also firmly the story of an atypical individual and the development of his distinctive genius.²⁶

Henry Morley followed Masson at University College, taking up the Professorship of English Language and Literature in 1865, having previously been a

²⁵ See David Masson, *British Novelists and their Styles: Being a Critical Sketch of the History of British Prose Fiction* (Cambridge: Macmillan & Co., 1859), pp. 214-27.

²⁶ David Masson, *The Life of John Milton: Narrated in Connexion with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of his Time*, 7 vols. (1608-1639; rpt. London: Macmillan & Co., 1881), vol. I, p. xi.

lecturer at King's College. Morley was one of the most active and visible evangelists of English literature in the second half of the nineteenth century, travelling the country lecturing to women's educational associations (of which he was, like Masson, a staunch supporter), extension classes and diverse philosophical and debating societies. His written criticism had an even greater impact than his charismatic performances at the lectern. His *First Sketch of English Literature*, published in 1873, was widely-read, selling between 30,000 and 40,000 copies in its first twenty-five years of publication.²⁷ The main aim of the book was to construct a history of English literature from its earliest days to the nineteenth century. The tone was brisk and the evaluations of writers breezy, offering a reliable, readable guide for the growing numbers of academic readers. Morley followed this up with a much more ambitious, and more scholarly work, *English Writers: An Attempt towards a History of English Literature*. This was conceived as a 20-volume history that reflected, as he recognised, the significance of his role as an academic rather than simply as a critic: he noted in his preface that as a consequence of his work as teacher he had been admitted 'to a new field of labour, in which study of Literature, until then the chief pleasure, became also the chief duty of his working life'.²⁸ The first volume of *English Writers* appeared in 1864 but it was not until the 1880s that he resumed the project, producing ten of the projected twenty volumes before his death in 1894 – although only managing to take the story of English writing as far as Shakespeare in its 4,000 pages. A more important contribution, certainly to education in the wider sense, was Morley's lifetime commitment to the publication and dissemination of cheap

²⁷ Altick, *The English Common Reader*, p. 185.

²⁸ Morley, *English Writers*, p. v.

editions of classic texts. He edited in the course of his professional life some 300 volumes of English and foreign classics in his own *Morley's Universal Library*, published by G. Routledge and Sons and selling for a shilling a volume, and in other series including *Cassell's National Library*, which retailed at threepence in paper covers and sixpence in cloth. These were among the most popular in the English-speaking world, with each volume of the Cassell's library selling somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 copies.²⁹

As the careers of Morley and Masson show, early full-time literary academics were subject to the competing demands of popularisation and scholarship. Their role as men of letters was to shape public debate about literary value, which they effected in lectures, literary journalism, and popular literary histories. The other, more strictly academic role, was that of literary scholar and analyst, subjecting texts and contexts to exacting technical scrutiny. If English literature was to become established in a university environment such rigour had to be emphasised in order to convince sceptical scholars in other disciplines, but if it was to become a truly popular subject expressing a social and national mission it needed to highlight its credentials as a cornerstone of a humane general education. Thus it was, for example, that an academic like Edward Dowden, who had been appointed to the Chair at Trinity College Dublin in 1867, catered for an academic audience with his *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art* (1876) and pioneering two-volume biography of Shelley (1886), but also provided books for the popular literary audience, such as his biography of Southey in the *English Men of Letters* series.

²⁹ Henry Shaen Solly, *The Life of Henry Morley, LL.D.* (London: Edward Arnold, 1898), p. 357.

Many others in this first generation of professionals similarly sought to bridge the gulf between publishing and scholarly research. At one end of the spectrum was F. J. Furnivall, the scholar and editor, and lecturer at F. D. Maurice's Working Men's College in London, who had an important role in founding the Early English Text Society in 1864: a body which had by the end of the century produced over a hundred volumes of previously unavailable manuscripts and early printed books. At the other end of this spectrum was Edward Arber who had been a student of Morley's at King's College, and who subsequently became a lecturer at University College under Morley before becoming in 1881 Professor of English at Mason Science College (later to become the University of Birmingham). Much of Arber's career was dedicated to the editing of popular editions including *Arber's English Reprints* in thirty volumes (1868-71), the eight-volume *An English Garner: Ingatherings from our History and Literature* (1877-96), and *The Scholar's Library of Old and Modern Works* in sixteen volumes (1880-84).

This popularisation of primary texts was matched by a growth in various types of primers and literary histories, often designed for the new examinations in the subject of English literature that proliferated in the second half of the nineteenth century. One of the first academics in this field was George Lillie Craik, a Scotsman who was Professor of English Literature and History at Queen's College Belfast from 1849 to 1866. Craik had published his six-volume *Sketches of the History of Literature and Learning in England from the Norman Conquest to the Present Day* between 1844 and 1845, and he followed it up with a dense 1,000 page, two-volume *A Compendious History of English Literature and the English Language from the Norman Conquest* in 1861 which he boiled down to a more manageable one volume in his *A Manual of English Literature* in the

following year: a work that continued in print well into the twentieth century, appearing as a part of the Everyman Library in 1909. Craik was an examiner for the Indian Civil Service in 1859 and 1862, so was well aware of the potential market for this kind of literary history. Thomas B. Shaw who had had to look a little further afield for an academic position, holding the posts of Professor of English Literature at the Imperial Alexander Lyceum in St Petersburg and Lector of English Literature at the University of St Petersburg, similarly recognised the market opened up by the new emphasis on proficiency in English literature demanded by professional examinations such as those for the Indian Civil Service (instituted in 1855) as well as those in the academic environment, such as the Oxford and Cambridge Local Examinations, which had begun in 1858. His *A History of English Literature* (1864) was a self-conscious attempt to address this market. Published in John Murray's *Student's Manuals* series, it was according to its editor, intended to be as 'useful as possible to Students preparing for the examination of the India Civil Service, the University of London, and the like'.³⁰ A similar, early work was William Spalding's *A History of English Literature: With an Outline of the Origin and Growth of the English Language* (1853). Spalding was Professor of Logic, Rhetoric, and Metaphysics at the University of St Andrews and had designed his book specifically for 'the instruction of young persons'. It was both a historical primer and an attempt to inculcate the appropriate critical spirit: its modern sections in particular making attempts 'to arouse reflection, both by occasional remarks on the relations between intellectual culture and the other elements of society, and by

³⁰ William Smith, Preface to Thomas B. Shaw, *A History of English Literature* (London: John Murray, 1864), pp. iii-iv.

hints as to the theoretical laws on which criticism should be founded'.³¹ The book has a strong philosophical and linguistic content, which perhaps gives some substance to Spalding's claim that it was more than merely chronology. And the mix seems to have had appeal, with the book going through fourteen editions by 1877. Thomas Arnold, brother of Matthew Arnold and father of Mrs Humphry Ward, who was Professor of English Literature at the Catholic University of Ireland (later University College Dublin), made a similar attempt to get beyond straightforward history in his *A Manual of English Literature, Historical and Critical* (1862) by dividing the book into a Historical Section and a Critical Section, dealing separately with the individual works and their generic, rhetorical, and philosophical qualities. Arnold professed himself indebted to Craik and Spalding as well as to the popularising work of Robert Chambers (while decrying their over-indulgent attitudes towards Scottish writers) and styled his book as an 'educational manual' that reflected the views of 'an ordinary Englishman'.³² Like the others mentioned, this was a work that covered the whole history of literature in England from its earliest beginning to the present, and like them it went through steady republication for the rest of the nineteenth century and the early parts of the next. Equally wide in scope, but with a slightly narrower critical framework was the work of another academic in Ireland, William Francis Collier of Trinity College Dublin. Collier's *A History of*

³¹ William Spalding, *A History Of English Literature: with an Outline of the Origin and Growth of the English Language: Illustrated by Extracts: for the Use of Schools and Private Students*, 14th edn. (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1877), pp. 1-2.

³² Thomas Arnold, *A Manual of English Literature: Historical and Critical* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1862), p. v.

English Literature (1862) was, as its subtitle *In a Series of Biographical Sketches* suggested, a book which was based on the premise that ‘true criticism cannot separate the author from his book’ and which offered a quick sprint (if some 550 pages can be so described) through lives and books from ‘nine eras’, stretching from an Anglo Saxon ‘pre-era’ to the contemporary ninth era inaugurated by the death of Sir Walter Scott.³³

By the time Morley was publishing his *First Sketch of English Literature* in 1873 the popular, and cheap, histories and student editions were appearing in significant numbers, and literary academics were finding themselves competing in a crowded market with schoolmasters, ministers, and professional writers. Morley’s book sold well but was put in the shade by the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke’s primer *English Literature from AD 670 to AD 1832* (1876) which sold 25,000 copies in its first ten months and had, by 1916, gone through 36 reprintings in four editions and sold nearly half a million copies.³⁴ Men of letters like Austin Dobson, with his *Civil Service Handbook of English Literature* (1874), Edmund Gosse in *A Short History of Modern English Literature* (1897), and Stephen Gwynn in *The Masters of English Literature* (1904), all aimed directly at the reader formed by English-literature teaching at school, college, or university. Others sought ever more schematic ways to render this history, among them Frederick Ryland’s *Chronological Outlines of English Literature* (1890) which was almost wholly taken up with extensive information in tabular form, and William Renton’s *Outlines of English Literature* (1893), a work aimed squarely at Extension students (being part of John

³³ William Francis Collier, *A History of English Literature: in a Series of Biographical Sketches* (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1882), p. iii.

³⁴ See Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 354.

Murray's series of *University Extension Manuals*) and which featured a number of innovative diagrammatic aids, among them a Venn diagram to illustrate intersections in the American literary tradition.³⁵

Oxford and Academic Respectability

Literary academics competed in this market, but were by the end of the century attempting to find ways to emphasise the seriousness and the distinctiveness of their work: to impose critical principles on what seemed a sprawl of mere chronology. George Saintsbury, another who had arrived in academe from a career in periodical journalism, and who took over from Masson as Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at Edinburgh University in 1895, prefaced his 818-page *A Short History of English Literature* (1898), with the unusual remark that no part of the book was based on his lectures, and the announcement, perhaps in a dig at the quality of popular literary history, that 'the substitution of bird's-eye views and sweeping generalizations for positive knowledge has been very sedulously avoided'. The book might contain his own critical opinions, wrote Saintsbury; however the object has not 'been to make these opinions prominent, but rather to supply something approaching that solid platform, or at least framework, of critical learning without which all critical opinion is worthless'.³⁶ Saintsbury's criticism signals an intention to put the historical study of literature back on

³⁵ See William Renton, *Outlines of English Literature* (London: John Murray, 1893), p. 233.

³⁶ George Saintsbury, *A Short History of English Literature* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1898), pp. v-vi.

a firm empirical and systematic basis, witnessed, among many other works, in his three-volume *A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe from the Earliest Texts to the Present Day* (1900-04) and in his contribution of twenty-one chapters to the *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1907-16). In this he is perhaps typical of the generation of academic literary scholars which followed Masson and Morley: a generation which still often had roots in the world of literary journalism but which was struggling to reconcile its critical facility and fluency with a more explicitly methodical scholarly and pedagogical earnestness.

Nowhere was this struggle more apparent than in the ancient universities. The broadly liberal and democratic impulse which had made English literature an increasingly suitable subject for national Secondary education and the Extension movement, was recognized and to some extent welcomed in these universities, but it also offered a threat to the assumptions of its professoriate, many of whom were convinced, especially in the wake of Mark Pattison's *Suggestions on Academic Organisation, with Especial Reference to Oxford* (1868), that the university should define itself more along the lines of the contemporary German university as a place of advanced scholarship rather than general education. At Oxford there was, as D. J. Palmer has put it, a distinct and unresolved 'conflict of interests between the party of research and the party of liberal education'³⁷

³⁷ D. J. Palmer, 'English' in M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (eds.), *The History of the University of Oxford: Vol. 7: Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 398.

The pressure that led to the establishing of the Merton Chair, and the controversy that followed the appointment of its first holder, brought such arguments under a wider public spotlight and exposed literary English to a rigorous examination. The main protagonist in this controversy was John Churton Collins, a literary journalist and energetic lecturer for the London and Oxford Extension societies -- and a disappointed contender for the chair. In the wake of this failure he made it his business to establish English literature as the subject of a separate honours School in the university – a task he took up with characteristic vigour and polemical relish. From the outset, Collins was conscious of the need for English literature to be seen to be placed on a rigorous systematic footing: this was the consistent theme of a series of articles that would form the core of his *The Study of English Literature: A Plea for its Recognition and Organization at the Universities* (1891). Faced with scholarly scepticism about the subject's credentials – the most notorious expression of which was the Regius Professor of History, E. A. Freeman's comments that literary study might amount to little more than 'mere chatter about Shelley' – Collins sought to establish it not just as a liberal art, but as a defensible academic discipline.

This was not simply opportunism. Like Saintsbury he was conscious of the need to establish professional standards of criticism, and was aware that some forms of academic discussion were slipping into impressionism and slipshod scholarship. Before the Merton controversy, in three articles published in 1880-81 Collins had acquired notoriety for his detailed analysis of what might now be described as the intertextuality of Tennyson's poetry. Collins believed he was engaging in valuable scholarship in pointing to the many antecedent texts woven into Tennyson's work, but to those unused to such

critical rigour this looked like an accusation of plagiarism. Tennyson certainly felt this way and famously dubbed Collins ‘the louse on the locks of literature’.³⁸ Collins carried this attention to literary detail, along with a rather characteristic tactlessness, into his discussions of other critics: most famously in his astringent reviews of John Addington Symonds’s *Shakspeare’s Predecessors in the English Drama* (1884) and Edmund Gosse’s Clark Lectures at Cambridge, *From Shakespeare to Pope* (1885). In the view of Collins, who was in the process of formulating his first interventions in the Oxford debate, both books exemplified the kinds of dilettantism commonly found not just in the contemporary Aesthetic movement but also in the burgeoning literary-critical and academic marketplace. The complaint about standards was one that Collins carried into *The Study of English Literature* where he criticized the university presses for ‘authorizing works to circulate with the *imprimatur* of the University, the flimsiness and shallowness of which are only exceeded by the incredible blunders with which they absolutely swarm.’³⁹ But while he was critical of such lapses from high scholarly standards, Collins was insistent that English literature should not be reduced merely to the dry business of remembering literary dates accurately or paying dogged attention to the historical development of literary language. For Collins, the reading of literature as a mere repository of linguistic and historical knowledge was the dessicating vice of philology – the dry demi-science that stifled the imaginative engagement on which literary study was predicated. What he

³⁸ Anthony Kearney, *John Churton Collins: The Louse on the Locks of Literature* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), pp. 88-92.

³⁹ John Churton Collins, *The Study of English Literature: a Plea for its Recognition and Organization at the Universities* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1891), p. 61.

was calling for instead was a systematising study of English literature that would put rhetorical, philosophical, and critical skills in the service of a predominating aesthetic and moral vision. He was particular about what such a system might involve, outlining an overambitious programme for teaching English literary texts in tandem with Classical and with modern European literatures, but was still perhaps a little vague about defining the principles on which such a critical pedagogy would actually be built. There is, arguably, something both typical and unsatisfying in attempts like the following to define exactly what it is that lies at the heart of good teaching and criticism:

It is the interpretation of power and beauty as they reveal themselves in language, not simply by resolving them into their constituent elements, but by considering them in their relation to principles. While an incompetent teacher traces no connection between phenomena and laws, and confounds accidents with essences, blundering among “categorical enumerations” and vague generalities, he who knows will show us how to discern harmony in apparent discord, and discord in apparent harmony.⁴⁰

Such talk of aesthetic harmony and critical principles is the warrant of a worthy set of aims, but it exposes in its inexactness the problem Collins and his successors would have in attempting to work a liberal arts philosophy into an academic system. In order to refute the jibes that it was merely ‘chatter’ or a subject that ‘is very pleasant to ramble in, but one that is exceedingly difficult to reduce to a definite and teach-worthy system’, Collins

⁴⁰Collins, *The Study of English Literature*, p. 51.

made promises about the rigour of the discipline that the discipline would quickly have doubts about the wisdom of delivering.⁴¹

Modern Languages and Literature in the University

The late acceptance of the literary study of English by the ancient universities was matched by their tentativeness in embracing the teaching of modern European literature. As with English literary study, the study of European literatures was taken up first by the new universities and was then further advanced by the need to cater for the particular interests of women students. The first half of the nineteenth century saw some significant English-language scholarship of European literature, the most notable being Henry Hallam's monumental *Introduction to the Literature of Europe during the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries* (1837-9), but within the academy there was little evidence of such scholarly endeavour. The only notable academic posts in modern European languages up to this point were four professorships established at University College, London in 1828. In 1847 the University of Oxford had, through the bequest of Sir Robert Taylor, established the Taylor Institution, with an associated new chair in modern European languages as well as a post of librarian and two language teachers. Like the academic posts in London, the main work of these academics was in practical language teaching and research rather than literary study. The first holder of the Oxford chair, the charismatic Friedrich Max Müller, lectured on German civilization and

⁴¹ The first jibe is E. A. Freeman's; the second was made by John Earle, Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford in *The Times*, 8 June 1887, p. 16; cited in Kearney, *The Louse on the Locks of Literature*, p. 77.

literature, most notably on Goethe and Schiller, but his research was directed specifically towards philology. When he took up a new chair in comparative philology at Oxford in 1868 the university abolished the chair in modern languages.⁴² Modern European languages, specifically French and German, were made options on the pass degree at in 1873 and an honours school of modern languages was finally instituted in 1903. In many senses modern languages had been much less well served at Oxford than oriental languages, to which the university had granted a separate faculty board in 1882 and an honours school in 1886.⁴³

Other universities had been quicker to develop academic capacity in modern languages, with Belfast, Dublin, and Manchester establishing chairs in the 1860s, and Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Nottingham and Sheffield following suit in the years between 1890 and 1904. That a large part of this was driven by the demands of women students was illustrated by developments at Cambridge, the first university to establish a complete curriculum for modern language and literature. Cambridge's tripos in Medieval and Modern Literatures was established in 1886 and in its early years women students outnumbered men. The tripos itself leaned significantly more to the medieval than modern, and while the medieval had a strong literary element, which included early

⁴² Giles Barber, 'The Taylor Institution' in *The History of the University of Oxford: Vol 6: Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 1*, ed. M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 631-40.

⁴³ Rebecca Posner, 'Modern Languages and Linguistics', in *The History of the University of Oxford: Vol 7: Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 2*, ed. M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 413-27

English authors, the modern language examination was largely practical: the literary, cultural, and historical study that would later form an important part of the degree was barely present at its beginning. The influence of the German academy could be felt in the emphasis placed on philology, and it was perhaps significant that the leading light of Medieval and Modern Literatures in its early years at Cambridge was the philologist and luminary of the Early English Text Society, Walter William Skeat, Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon from 1878-1912.⁴⁴ Though there were some notable advances in scholarship in the field in the late years of the century, particularly through the efforts of the Modern Language Association of Great Britain and its journal, the *Modern Language Quarterly*, begun in 1897, which contained a diversity of articles on issues of English and European language and literature, the academic study of modern languages was often a matter of language learning and teaching and philological study before it was a literary-critical activity. It was also significantly under-represented in the academy until a prime-ministerial committee during the First World War took matters into hand and proposed increases in the number of university posts in modern languages alongside a greater synthesis of linguistic, literary, historical, and philosophical approaches to European cultures.⁴⁵

Critical Dissatisfactions

⁴⁴ Christopher N. L. Brooke, *A History of the University of Cambridge: Vol 4, 1870-1990* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 431-6

⁴⁵ *Modern Studies: Being the Report of the Position of the Committee on Modern Languages in the Educational System of Great Britain* (London: HMSO, 1918).

In the two decades between the establishing of the Oxford English School and the beginning of the First World War, scholarly criticism in English was in a healthy position in universities, as was shown by Saintsbury's *Short History*, by A. C. Bradley's work on Shakespeare, and Walter Raleigh's work on Milton, as well as the *Cambridge History of English Literature*. Textual scholarship, too, was being taken to new levels by luminaries such as R. B. McKerrow and W. W. Greg (an early editor of the *Modern Language Quarterly*) in their work on the Elizabethan drama and H. J. C. Grierson's editing of Donne. But there was a definite ambivalence about literary study more generally, and particularly about the ways in which teaching might encourage the singular imaginative engagement with the text without burying it under superfluous scholarly detail and overly schematic pedagogy.

A fifty-year period had seen the introduction of English literature as a subject in schools, as a key component in the exams for the Indian Civil Service and Oxford and Cambridge Local Examinations, as the dominant subject in the rapidly-growing area of women's education and the Extension movement, and it now seemed ready to topple Classics as the cornerstone of a liberal arts education in the university. Yet several university teachers of English now seemed to step back and reflect on whether the unique quality of sympathetic engagement with texts which their subject cultivated was being enhanced or stifled by the whole academic apparatus that now surrounded it. Many remained sceptical of examinations, for example. Oxford critics like E. A. Freeman had worried that the subject was unexaminable, and therefore unfit for university status, to which Collins had responded by indicating the types of questions that might suitably be asked. While this showed the possibility of examining English, it did not establish its

desirability or its propriety as a method. Many who followed Collins were much less sanguine about examinations, among them Walter Raleigh, who in his inaugural lecture as Professor of English Language and Literature at Glasgow University characterised the examiner as ‘a snail that crawls over the fairest flowers’, adding that ‘it would do no irreparable harm to anyone if English Literature were never examined on from now to the crack of doom’.⁴⁶ The man whom he succeeded in this post, A. C. Bradley, had been little more impressed, talking of ‘the valley of dry bones where bad examiners walk’.⁴⁷ George Birkbeck Hill similarly told a meeting of the Teachers University Association at Oxford that ‘Examiners and school inspectors like cows are always trying to break in where by their clumsy trampling they can only do mischief’ and cautioned his audience to ‘resist, as far as we can, their invasion of that part of the mind where they can only work havoc’.⁴⁸

The common ground for complaint here was the familiar one that the systematic learning being practised in schools and universities was threatening to kill the literary spirit it was charged with nurturing. Hill argued that imaginative engagement with narrative and the fostering of ‘an ardent and noble curiosity’ was a fundamental of all good teaching, and especially that of English literature. To bring students to literature, or

⁴⁶ Walter Raleigh, *The Study of English Literature: Being the Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Glasgow on Thursday, October 18th, 1900* (Glasgow: James MacLehose & Sons, 1900), p. 6.

⁴⁷ A. C. Bradley, *The Teaching of English Literature* (Glasgow: James Maclehorse & Sons, 1891), p. 8.

⁴⁸ George Birkbeck Hill, *Writers and Readers* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), p. 177.

as Hill put it to ‘keep our children in the company of great writers’, needed therefore to be done with the lightest of touches so as not to pluck the bloom from that first almost magical encounter.⁴⁹ Bradley similarly sought to preserve and enhance the quality of this first engagement with the literary text. He emphasised in his pamphlet *The Teaching of English Literature* (1891) that texts had to be appreciated first as experiences before the tools of factual, historical, and grammatical analysis might usefully be brought to bear: the primary role of both criticism and teaching was the sympathetic ‘re-creation of a work in the imagination’.⁵⁰ Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who was effectively Cambridge’s first Professor of English Literature, similarly emphasised the need for a kind of wilfully naïve reading of literary texts, warning in his inaugural lecture of the need to eschew ‘all general definitions and theories, through the sieve of which the particular achievement of genius is so apt to slip’.⁵¹ For Quiller-Couch, there was little need for academic definitions of terms like ‘the Grand Style’ when these could be grasped by any competent, initiated reader: what need for definitions, as he put it, when ‘I recognise and feel the *thing*?’⁵² The scepticism of Oxford’s own first Professor of English Literature, Sir Walter Raleigh, was, if anything even greater. He had already, in *Style* (1897), talked of ‘the palsy of definition’ and signalled his preference for a vital Romantic attitude to a

⁴⁹ Birkbeck Hill, *Writers and Readers*, pp. 177, 182.

⁵⁰ Bradley, *The Teaching of English Literature*, p. 10.

⁵¹ The first King Edward VII Professor of English Literature, the Classicist A. W. Verrall, died shortly after being appointed to the post.

⁵² Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 1923), pp. 13-14.

Classicism whose adherents are ‘lovers of generalisation, cherishers of the dry bones of life’ and whose ‘art is transformed into a science, their expression into an academic terminology.’⁵³ His inaugural address at the University of Glasgow continued this theme. In a manner that might seem rather incompatible with the occasion, Raleigh expressed the opinion that he couldn’t ‘see that lectures can do so much good as reading the books from which the lectures are taken’. This was part of a wider problem that he expressed in the following way:

Literature is the expression in words of all the best that man has thought and felt: how are we to catch it and subdue it to the purposes of the class-room? Other studies there certainly are that find their natural home in a University; some indeed that are cherished and furthered nowhere else. But the spirit of literature is a shy, difficult, vagrant spirit; it will not submit to imprisonment nor to the rules of an academy.⁵⁴

Raleigh’s definition of literature here is no doubt intended to recall Matthew Arnold’s description of culture as ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’.⁵⁵ As such, it is perhaps designed to emphasise just how far Raleigh’s view of the academy as a confining, constraining institution is from Arnold’s opinion of thirty-five years before,

⁵³ Walter Raleigh, *Style* (London: Edward Arnold, 1897), p. 40.

⁵⁴ Raleigh, *The Study of English Literature*, p. 4.

⁵⁵ Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold: Vol 5: Culture and Anarchy*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), p. 233.

that the academy might offer the best hope of broadening the intelligence and refining the tone of what Arnold saw as the narrow British ‘provinciality’ of critics as diverse as Addison and Ruskin.⁵⁶

Having worked so hard to get into the academy, it seemed that English Studies was now attempting to squeeze back out of it, or at any rate renegotiate itself into a more accommodating position. Raleigh did institute pedagogic change at Oxford, introducing a curriculum that enacted a clear separation between literary and linguistic approaches. But this was not based on any clear sense of literary-critical principles. If anything, after his arrival at Oxford, Raleigh was becoming even less sure that rigorous critical principles were either possible or desirable. By 1911, he was welcoming what he saw as a ‘new freedom and antinomianism’ in criticism, heralded by Saintsbury’s *History of Criticism* and Joel Spingarn’s lecture ‘The New Criticism’. For Raleigh this deepening ‘scepticism which refuses standards and axioms and laws’ was a happy release from the dogmas and systems that were threatening to stultify literary criticism in the academic environment: the problem Quiller-Couch identified when he described a pedagogy ‘obtruding lesser things upon [the student’s] vision until what is really important, the poem or the play itself, is seen in distorted glimpses, if not quite blocked out of view’.⁵⁷ Raleigh posited instead a drawing back of critical aims, a refusal of the role of literary judge, believing it

⁵⁶ Matthew Arnold, ‘The Literary Influence Of Academies’, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold: Vol. 3: Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), pp. 232-57.

⁵⁷ Walter Raleigh, ‘A Note on Criticism’ in George Gordon (ed.), *On Writing and Writers* (London: Edward Arnold, 1926), p. 216; Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Writing*, p. 11.

to be ‘a good sign, and a vital sign, when humility is recognised as the first essential for this task, and when the conclusions attained are modest, and dubious, and few’.⁵⁸

Literary Studies had come a long way in the academy since Masson and Morley but on the eve of the First World War some of its practitioners had started to wonder whether it hadn’t come a little too far a little too quickly. Literary and textual scholarship had established themselves strongly and were plainly thriving in the academic environment. But literary criticism was much less easy in its academic role – its uneasiness would continue after the First World War, manifesting itself in the hesitant nationalistic platitudes of the Newbolt Report.⁵⁹ It was, then, perhaps a little disappointing that after years of struggle for recognition of the subject, the Professors of English Literature at England’s two most august institutions could find themselves concluding, as Raleigh did, that ‘when a real book finds a real reader half the questions of criticism vanish. Appetite justifies itself.’⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Raleigh, 'A Note on Criticism', pp. 216-17.

⁵⁹ *The Teaching of English in England: Being the report of the Departmental Committee Appointed by the President of the Board of Education to Inquire into the Position of English in the Educational System of England* (London: HMSO, 1921).

⁶⁰ Raleigh, 'A Note on Criticism', p. 215.

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