Realizing the Integrity of English Studies: An Ethos of Commitment

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Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn write, “What confronts us at the present time in English and American literary studies is not a unified field at all but diverse historical projects and critical idioms that are not organized around a single center but originate from a variety of sources, some of which lie outside the realm of literary study altogether” (3). It is precisely this situation that troubles many. Avrom Heishman, for example, claims that contemporary practices leave “little that might define or limit the field, much less supply cohesiveness for a renewed ‘order of things’” (810). In a similar vein, John Basset contends that though English studies’ viability comes from its ability to adapt to change, “one consequence of a strategy of compromise can be the loss of coherence and integrity in the major” (329). Peter Carofiol sums up his perception of disciplinary reconfigurations when he states, “coherence means exclusivity, diversity means disorder” (611). For Fleishman, Basset, and Carofiol, altering English studies to accommodate emerging and disciplinary interests diminishes the discipline’s integrity and leaves it in a state of disarray. Though certain intellectual anxieties might be expected from a field that often thinks of itself in terms of crises, the notion of integrity that underscores these debates takes on a suspicious logic in an era of dwindling budgets, changing student populations, and interdisciplinary aspirations, and it begs the questions: What is “the integrity” of English studies? What and whose interests are served by safeguarding this integrity?

These questions become even more curious when we consider the complex interworkings of literacy education and the field’s public legitimation. A widespread public interest in higher education emanates from urgently felt national imperatives. Indeed, with the now landmark publication of Newsweek’s “Why Johnny Can’t Write” in 1975, educators and politicians alike re-instituted a literacy campaign after even the most educationally advantaged students at Harvard and Yale fell below national standards. Though the literacy-as-crisis discourse that resounds from “Why Johnny Can’t Write” still echoes, it would be inaccurate to compare the problems and solutions of past literacy crises to contemporary ones, for what it means to be literate today is vastly different from what it meant in 1975. As Maureen Hourigan’s Literacy as Social Exchange:
Intersections of Class, Gender, and Culture illustrates, literacy no longer refers to acquired skills. Rather, it involves a socially conscious activity produced by conflicting exchanges between classes, genders, and cultures. She contends that since students from different cultures and economic classes constitute the demographic of English classrooms, teachers should open their pedagogy "not only to the logic of non-conventional writing ... but to the logic of nonconventional reading as well" (125). In this way, educators learn a great deal about the cultural factors that shape how students learn to read, write, and think critically. Hourigan also insists that it is equally important to interrogate the relationship between literacy and access to higher education: "As classrooms in American colleges and universities become increasingly diverse and funds for higher education shrink, discussions of access and excellence will become questions of access or excellence" (127; emphasis added). For Hourigan, examining this relation makes clear the social, political, and economic issues affecting post-secondary education. Mary Louise Pratt would probably agree with Hourigan, but she would point out that literacy campaigns also derive from efforts to "reimagine cultural and civic identity in the United States" (9). But, of course, how literacy is defined in a culturally plural nation is not a simple question in the wake of discussions about curricular reform, though Allan Bloom and William Bennett would argue otherwise. Simply, for Bloom and Bennett, the great books curriculum provides excellence in learning and contributes to the development of a particular kind of educated citizen. This kind of education would no doubt produce what Pratt describes as a "narrow and highly uniform elite with no commitment to either multiculturalism or educational democracy" (15). John Guillory explains in Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formations:

It has proven to be much easier to quarrel about the content of the curriculum than to confront the implications of a fully emergent professional-managerial class which no longer requires the old cultural capital of the bourgeoisie. The decline of the humanities was never the result of newer noncanonical courses or tests, but of a large-scale "capital flight" in the domain of culture... The professional-managerial class has made the correct assessment that, so far as its future profit is concerned, the reading of great works is not worth the investment of very much time or money. The perceived devaluations of the humanities curriculum is in reality a decline in its market value. (45-46)

There are reasons here to justify altering our practices, but they are neither coherent nor consistent. Some would consider this situation a dire symptom of a vanishing discipline, for it involves a loss of identity and a rearticulation of purpose. Tilly Warnock, however, claims that this general yet complex understanding of the function of English departments creates an opportunity for English professionals to argue persuasively for the value of what they do in terms that can easily be understood. According to Warnock, if we do not interact with the powerful demographic and economic forces that are currently reforming English studies, "our work will be defined for us by others as technological in
An Ethos of Commitment 73

a limited sense of the word" (155). She states that we must therefore “respond to questions from citizens, legislators, parents, and students who ask, ‘What’s the use?’” (152).

Thus, the debates that have competed and continue to compete for the power to interpret reform in English studies illustrate what is at stake for English departments: determining whether and in what ways English studies serves a useful social purpose. It is clear to me that our discipline functions in part by the relationship between internal self-definitions and external public legitimation. I share Michael Bérubé’s idea that the potential of the field depends largely on what the discipline of English means institutionally, and what English means institutionally “is dependent in turn on a congeries of social and economic movements well beyond the control of any one professor, department, or syllabus” (19). Since our work is inseparable from larger social conditions, it seems wise to pause and consider the implications of a logic that claims in order to maintain disciplinary integrity, strict disciplinary boundaries must be enforced. Such an examination seems necessary in light of theorists—like Stanley Fish, for example—who insist that it is a “requirement” for “the respectability” of English departments to remain “distinctive.” On the surface, this statement illustrates the rhetoric of Fish’s overall message: English departments must coalesce around some distinctive set of goals that will differentiate their work from other academic departments’ work and must stop trying to “redraw the boundaries.” For those who want to expand the relations of knowledge and politics or even think that they can, they should find another job. In Fish’s strident proclamation, “the academy—love it or leave it” (Professional 2). If we look deeper, however, we begin to understand how disciplinary fears and desires motivate Fish and others to employ the notion of integrity vis-a-vis disciplinarity: they know, structurally, that the prestige of English departments is not what it once was; therefore, they evoke a sense of integrity to recoup some of the discipline’s lost authority.

What I would like to argue here is that the cohesion of English studies purported by theorists like Fish may seem like a rallying call from an aging disciplinary orthodoxy, but it needs serious consideration—not in an attempt to restructure the authority of English studies but rather to suggest that such arguments ignore the reality of English departments and belie the potential of our work. As Hourigan, Guillory, and Warnock demonstrate, English departments neither function to maintain the status quo nor exist in isolation. They perform a particular kind of work in the world, and their nature is such that they have multiple opportunities to enact ongoing criticisms of everyday lives, of discourses that shape material reality: they directly engage academic disciplines and thereby have the potential to address public concerns via books, journals, and speeches; they also indirectly engage students’ thoughts and actions. If we adhere to rigid disciplinary boundaries, as Fish suggests, we miss important occasions to advance our work and effect change. Therefore, I want to redefine the integrity of English studies—move it from an authorial and structural
referential to an ethos committed to knowing, learning, and studying other forms of discourse. Anything less will avoid the difficult questions about the interrelationship among our purposes, situations, ethics, languages, and personhood. Diana Fuss provides a useful way to think about the significance of introducing new vocabularies into discourses when she states that one can, by using contested words, "use them up, exhaust them, transform them into the historical concepts they are and have always been" (7). That is to say, I want to contest the use of integrity, transform it into the historical concept that it is by working from the inside of our inherited vocabulary, and turn it inside out—giving it a new meaning. As Kenneth Burke reminds us, words are not tools used for merely conveying thoughts; they are a means of action. Reconceptualizing the integrity of English studies, then, can provide us with new terms for action, new means to interact with intellectual and ethical developments. Before I elaborate on these points and outline a kind of literacy that will work toward these ends, I would like to consider Fish’s argument in more detail to illustrate why it is necessary to introduce a new vocabulary: the notion of integrity he advocates—a coherent and distinctive curriculum—no longer sustains the viability of English studies. Though there are other theorists who make similar arguments, I choose to focus on Fish because his voice seems to speak the loudest, sounding a need to adjust the volume.

A Distinctively Hawed Integrity

In "Them We Burn: Violence and Conviction in the English Department," Fish responds to the question posed by the nineteenth annual Alabama Symposium on English and American Literature: "Is there a discipline in this department?" In his answer, he discusses the necessity to define English studies with "hermetically sealed vocabularies" and "sharp disciplinary boundaries," positioning "uniquely qualified" individuals in positions of authority. Though Fish’s "distinctive" ideas may seem ironic—in that he has done important work in such disciplines as law, philosophy, history, and anthropology—he is deadly serious in his objections to liberal tendencies to ignore disciplinary boundaries. The works that encourage and engage interdisciplinary practices, according to Fish, "weaken or destroy that distinctiveness and put us out of business" (163). He draws on Milton’s Areopagitica to illustrate his desire to rid liberal projects of the tendency to "keep the conversation going" (172). He retells the moment in which Milton, after addressing the praises of tolerance and freedom of the press, turns around and in effect says, "Hey, but of course I didn’t mean Catholics. Them we burn." Fish uses this passage not to offend Catholics but to say that there has to be a point at which we say, "Not X. "If we teach and write from conviction—a term he defines as "silencing the voices of those you think bad and wrong"—and do not sacrifice it to utopian dreams, Fish states, "our discipline will then live in all its glorying and enabling particularity" (172).

Yet, if we teach and write from the conviction Fish suggests, then all of our glory and enabling particularity will come from the status quo—from those who
have the power to determine who should and should not be heard. Power, in this situation, is neither inherently good nor evil. But given the way Fish authorizes the constitutive factors of English departments, two intellectual backlashes will occur: First, our practices will require what Gerald Graff calls an "abrupt renunciation" of what is arguably one of the most enabling discoveries of literary history: literature is not a closed category, but one that permeates and overlaps with the concerns of philosophy, rhetoric, politics, sociology, law, psychology, and other disciplines (14). Though Fish makes an important point when he claims that some interdisciplinary scholarship has been facile, especially when it claims to "subvert dominant ideology" or precipitate "hegemonic struggles," it is difficult to see that the mixing of literary criticism, history, and politics results in institutional death rather than in vital intellectual work. Graff provides an incisive critique: "Any dominant critical mode at a given moment inevitably produces a certain quantity of bad, silly, formulaic work. So while Fish is right up to a point, he ignores the fact that in an earlier era the failure to mix literary criticism, history, and politics also resulted in a good deal of bad literary criticism, bad history, and bad politics" (1314). The second backlash involves re-institutionalizing a hierarchical structure in which literature maintains its intellectual prestige and composition once again gets relegated to the service component of the department. He provides two anecdotes illustrating this point: One is an incident when he was in graduate school, working at a drugstore. During one of their breaks, Fish and a co-worker posed the usual question to each other: What is it that you do? Fish told his coworker that he was in graduate school studying English. His co-worker, after thinking about Fish's answer, responded, "Oh, verbs and adjectives!" The second anecdote describes an interdepartmental softball game in which the opposing team teased that the English department team will no doubt try to talk its way into victory—using verbal skills as a substitute for athletic talent. Fish narrates these stories to indicate the public's perception of English departments and to exemplify the kind of situation we should take advantage of to identify our usefulness: "Someone, after all, should be taking care of verbs and adjectives. Someone should be codifying and refurbishing those verbal skills that on occasion move the world" (161). For Fish, taking care of verbs and adjectives as well as codifying and refurbishing verbal skills are a ready-made rationale for our existence, which we would be "foolish" to "surrender." If we were to take his recommendations seriously, English would be defined with aesthetic interests (literature) powerfully entrenched and rhetoric and grammar (composition) reduced to petty concerns.

Claiming that such perceptions of our work provide an appropriate opportunity for English teachers to present to the public an understanding of our mission in terms the public recognizes, Fish fails to do what most compositionists have done and wisely continue to do: define English to be more than verbs and adjectives. As the rich and growing body of composition scholarship indicates, it is over-deterministic and reductive to view our work as
merely grammatical. English studies involves a multitude of tasks that encourages teachers to develop curricula that not only meet the needs of students and institutions but also make critical interventions in the world. Alternative teaching methods and subject matter as well as dialogic classrooms have been on composition studies agenda for some time now. In “Interrupting Our Way to Agency: Feminist Cultural Studies and Composition,” for instance, Nedra Reynolds persuasively argues that since postmodern theories of language and subjectivity pose keen questions for composition instruction, feminist compositionists need to extend a theory of agency to writing and engage in discursive exchanges. She writes, “Agency is not simply about finding one’s own voice but also about intervening in discourse of the everyday and cultivating rhetorical tactics that make interruption and resistance an important part of any conversation” (59). Fish would no doubt object to such practices, and he would probably be indignant over composition studies appropriation of the border metaphor, in which scholars, teachers, teacher-scholars, and scholar-teachers negotiate across the borders of competing theories, disciplines, and literacy requirements in order to expand the teachings of the classroom to include segments of the larger community, both on and off campus. In Composition in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis and Change, for example, the contributors of this edited collection map what Donald Daiker terms the “new geography of composition” (2). Writers such as Shirley Brice Heath illustrate how many institutions of higher education are expanding their curricula to meet the needs of changing student populations. She cites examples of universities establishing programs for inner-city youth organizations and of community colleges working with industry. Linda Hower takes a different direction in “Literate Action.” She literally moves her classroom from the campus of Carnegie Mellon to Pittsburgh’s Community Literacy Center to broaden her students and the institution’s vision of literacy to include intellectual action and social involvement. Further, Andrea Lunsford, whose goal is to enlarge the academic community, endorses “dissolving” academic boundaries because they neglect “the largely collaborative and dispersed nature of most creative endeavors.” Moving outside restrictive disciplinary markers and placing students at the center of their activities, compositionists focus their attention on finding alternative methods of teaching and studying, alternative methods to develop literacy in students.

This brief discussion is not meant to repolarize composition studies and literary studies nor to suggest that they do not inform each other; rather, it is meant to illustrate that it seems doubtful that English is now or ever will be a coherently defined discipline. Its disparate activities and multiple modes of inquiry, vaguely articulated methodologies, and diverse functions seem too broad to fit under a single disciplinary definition. This state of affairs, however, should not trouble us. What should concern us is how some theorists compete for the power to limit a range of practices that seem likely to remain both literary and extraliterary—that is, intertextual, complex, and conflicted. Fish would likely take this last statement as a symptom of liberal tendencies to collapse
standards and of capitulation to relativism. I would not agree. Instead, I would argue that it is a realistic assessment of our discipline. English departments serve larger social, economic, and political objectives. It would be foolish, if not arrogant and misleading, to maintain the rigid set of textual and writing practices that Fish advocates. At the most obvious level, his ideas not only reinscribe the cultural hegemony of certain class, gender, and race groups at a time when this hegemony is being challenged in daily experiences of ordinary citizens; they also limit the possibilities of developing other forms of knowledge. English studies most broadly conceived works to foster critical reading, writing, and thinking capabilities which can be used in quotidian situations as well as in intellectual endeavors to examine meaning in texts and textual formations. What makes English studies unique and important to people both inside and outside the academy, then, is not its distinctive character but rather its cultivation of literacy skills. My question now becomes: what kind of literacy would realize the breadth of this meaning-making potential?

An Ethos of Commitment

In order to answer this question, I want to make clear my thoughts on literacy, which can best be articulated in Jay Robinson’s words: “Literacy is an outcome, not a skill, and not (even) a competency. It is something that is achieved when competencies are enabled through exercise of the human capacity to make meaning” (246). That is to say, literacy develops through the productive exercise of language, through the composing and comprehending of texts. It aims to reach beyond a familiarity with academic discourse to a language that puts us in contact with our lived experiences, social identities, and ways of being in the world. A goal for such an education involves an expansion of meaning-making capabilities, an interdisciplinary literacy that allows both academics and students to move from restricted and restricting ways of being and behaving in the world to an open space of difference. Yet, these open spaces are not likely to occur within a unified discipline defined by a single purpose and method but rather from an alliance of distinct entities, each in flux and each establishing tentative relationships among particular departments and faculty. Making connections in this fashion will loosen the idea of an all-encompassing discipline and connect them locally, utilizing work already being done. James Slevin suggests that localized relations will emerge “only by abandoning the illusion of total unity, by our agreeing to disagree with some, perhaps most, of our professional colleagues, and then by exploring how deeply and significantly we agree with others” (545). Robinson, however, claims that establishing connections among disciplines involves more than a “will” or a bridge. It requires more serious talk about the human uses of language. For Robinson, in order for a new literacy to emerge, one that develops “an easy familiarity with a certain body of texts, a particular attitude toward them, and special practices for reading texts so that they will yield the appropriate attitudes, “we need to create a vocabulary that allows us both to talk intelligibly to one another and to write what another can read” (246).
I want to extrapolate on the points Robinson and Slevin make and argue that the scholarship on Writing in the Curriculums (WIC) and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) provide excellent examples of the kind of disciplinary connections English studies should continue to develop at local levels, building intellectual foundations that enable students to enter into discourse communities as knowledgeable participants rather than as conventional followers. This scholarship offers a way to conceptualize interdisciplinary work, though it often reports that its future is in jeopardy because the education of interdisciplinary work will require significant reallocations of resources and priorities within and among disciplines. WIC and WAC not only address issues concerning the difficulties students have with acquiring a disciplinary discourse, a literacy, in their academic pursuits, but they also demonstrate that once students acquire a specialized knowledge, they have an equally difficult time articulating that knowledge in terms that are easily grasped by people outside of their respective professions. For example, Charles Bazerman provides an historical account of Sir Isaac Newton's promotion of his optical findings. In his narration, he describes how Newton struggles with his own discourse's language—trying to make sense of his and other scientists' work—as well as with the presentation of his work to others. Newton, according to Bazerman, had problems addressing his audiences and responding to the conceptions and objections of his readers. Bazerman's reading of Newton illustrates how people negotiate among varying and often conflicting discourses in order to communicate effectively with others. This last sentence may seem trite; however, it is important to keep in mind, for instance, that ecologists or community planners often interact with biologists, geologists, and civil engineers. In these kinds of situations, not only is it necessary for ecologists or community planners to have a command of their own discourse, it is equally important for those professionals to have a command of other discourses. WAC and WIC programs teach students, through writing-intensive curricula, to negotiate the inter texuality of communication. More importantly, they enact a commitment to developing a strong interdisciplinary literacy.

I have been arguing for an understanding that as a discipline we need to interrogate disciplinarity claims that seek coherence in an orthodox department. If English studies continues to identify itself as a field committed to making meaning, it needs to develop a stronger vocabulary that encourages productive interdisciplinary interactions—interactions in which words and actions produce further debates and considerations. Developing literacy among disciplines through a commitment to know, learn, and study other discourses, English studies can strengthen its place within the university and community at large and can thereby add value and integrity to its disciplinary activities, the integrity Bassett and Fish claim English studies loses when it works with other disciplines. As I perceive it, working with and in other disciplines, English studies not only gains an expanded knowledge, reinforcing the idea that learning occurs through various sources and mediums, it also strengthens its integrity. We in English are
An Ethos of Commitment 79

critically aware that our intentions and methods are affected by the academic communities to which we belong. We are also aware that our actions are motivated in part by our desire to maintain our positions within the university and the culture. With this complex understanding of our relation both to English departments and to society at large, we can decide how to present ourselves to students, to the university, and to the public—realizing, of course, that our terms affect our attitudes. Since English departments are not static and change is part of what we do, the traditional notion of structural integrity that some theorists advocate may be an impossibility. What is possible, however—though through much conflict, debate, and complex interworkings—is an ethos of commitment that connects English studies and other disciplines at local levels, giving our word-work a material reality, for what we say will be realized in what we do.¹

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Notes
¹ I want to thank Gary A. Olson for reading and commenting on previous drafts of this essay.

Works Cited


