

The Figure of Writing and the Future of English Studies

Marc Bousquet

The Literature in English Studies

For me the most compelling tension in English studies today is the one between the figure of reading and the figure of writing, especially as it plays out in what David Downing calls managed disciplinarity, the disciplinary division of labor between writing and literature. Nearly everyone thinking about this issue acknowledges that the distinction serves to justify the division of resources and rewards—time, salary, prestige, power—rather than a coherent intellectual division. This was the case for much of the twentieth century. So long as the literature curriculum remained central to sustaining nationalist and imperial projects, faculty working under the sign of “literature” were steadily more likely to be associated with research-intensive, or at least tenurable, appointments. In these positions they were more likely to control institutional resources, shape the disciplinary agenda of the field, receive funding and media recognition, and so on. As Robert Connors (1997), Sharon Crowley (1998), James Berlin (2003 [1996]), Stephen North (2000), Bruce McComiskey (2006), and many others have observed, the emergence of “literature” as a synecdoche for the many concerns of English sometimes came at a heavy price for faculty whose research or teaching encompassed such concerns as rhetoric, composition, philology, English education, creative writing, even critical theory and cultural studies. Many faculty with these concerns simply abandoned English departments, joining schools of education or departments of linguistics, communications, or philosophy;

others seceded en masse, forming departments, programs, or even new disciplines of their own. Where faculty with these concerns remained under the administration of English, many were relegated to teaching-intensive, generally nontenurable appointments.

By the late twentieth century, however, a “long-term decline in the cultural capital of literature” was spectacularly in evidence, as part of a larger decline in the role of the humanities in reproducing the professional-managerial class for whom, as John Guillory (1995: 139) bluntly observes, “technical and professional knowledge have replaced the literary curriculum.” At its most basic, this shift means that members of the educated classes are today far less likely to hail each other at cocktail parties, tennis matches, and job interviews by using such forms of call and response as dropping a book title — say, *Moby-Dick* — in order to elicit such appropriate responses as “Ah, Melville,” “Call me Ishmael,” or “Oh, I never finished that!” Today the circuit of recognition — sign, countersign; challenge, password — is completed for the majority of professionals and managers just as efficiently by class-specific tastes in music, television, film, or the massive discourse of management theory (“‘Management by objectives’? Ah, Drucker.”). One could easily argue that increasingly the management curriculum is “the” undergraduate curriculum, except for the vocational workforces and those of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), while the liberal arts generally have been redefined as, effectively, extracurricular. (Or at best peripherally preprofessional for such fields such as communications, law, and teaching.)

Even from the bleak perspective of the arts and humanities as a whole, the outlook for literary study per se is especially grim. Along with half a dozen other figures in English studies, I have previously written about broad changes in the academic workforce, especially the shifting of employment away from tenured faculty to a contingent workforce (Bousquet 2008). By fall 2007 contingent faculty outnumbered the tenure stream by at least three to one, roughly the inverse of the proportions forty years earlier. Across the profession, this trend line will drive the percentage of tenure-stream faculty into single digits within twenty years. It is hard to imagine that the trend line for English could be worse — but it is — and the outlook for literature is worse yet. A 2008 analysis by the Modern Language Association (MLA) of data from the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) shows that between 1993 and 2004, the hiring of nontenurable faculty continued to dramatically outpace tenure-track hiring in the profession as a whole. In absolute numbers, however, most disciplines gained a modest number of tenure-track lines, or at least held steady. Political science gained

2.5 percent new lines; philosophy and religion packed on 43 percent. English, however, lost more than three thousand tenure-track lines, an average annual loss of three hundred positions. This amounted to slightly more than one in every ten tenurable positions in English — literally a decimation. If that trend proves to have continued — and all indications are that it has — by early 2010 English will have shed another fifteen hundred lines (ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing 2008: 5–6).

The decimation or more of the field hardly begins to tell the story of the losses to literary study in particular, however, since there has been notable growth in tenure-track hiring in some of the subordinated fields, especially rhetoric and composition. (As I have observed before [Bousquet 2002], to less than universal acclaim in the rhet-comp discourse, much of this growth has to do with the need for low-level administration of a vast army of the nontenurable: while only a minority of the research produced by rhet-comp specialists is about program administration, the lower-managerial subjectivity shapes the discourse of the field.) As rhet-comp specialists continue to do more and more administration — in institution-spanning positions across the curriculum, in digital media labs, writing programs, writing majors and minors, and offering new graduate degrees — more tenure-track faculty are being hired in creative, technical, and professional writing, including scriptwriting, creative nonfiction, and composing for digital media. Some of the most interesting new hiring is in socially engaged writing and rhetoric, responding to growing support for civic engagement in pedagogy.

In the limited space of this forum, I would like to zero in on the question begged by that last observation: with all of these new justifications for hiring, why all the pessimism in English studies? After all, though literature may be receiving less support, old standbys like rhetoric and writing have unprecedented traction along fascinating new paths of inquiry and practice, and many research scholars under the sign of “literature” have rapidly and willingly shifted their research objects to nonliterary texts (often in close relationship with cultural studies, women’s studies, and ethnic studies). Reasonable observers from other disciplines or professions can fairly shrug and ask, “What’s the big deal?” With stunning new justifications for its activities that far outnumber the reasons to shrink, English should be experiencing a renaissance (at least relative to other disciplines), not a collapse.

There is no single answer to this question. A big part of the problem is structural, as I have suggested, so that new hiring in all fields is overwhelmingly nontenurable. But English has experienced this structural change with particular ferocity, along with a crisis of dominance that is at least twofold.

From the declining node of dominance we see an anxious response by the research faculty still operating under the sign of “literature,” to whom a recent disturbing MLA report speaks.¹ This faculty still maintains administrative control over most departments and the more prominent disciplinary channels: the result, in many departments, has been a growing flight to the reactionary postures exemplified by the report, released by the MLA’s Association of Departments of English (ADE). It reveals willingness to trade almost anything (tenure, wages, and course load, especially when these are someone else’s) in defense of a vision of English studies that peaked in the 1960s. At the same time, the rising rhet-comp mainstream has invested heavily in what Richard Miller (1998) memorably dubs “the arts of complicity,” or the worldview of education administration. Rhet-comp’s “complicity” is in accepting a majority nontenurable workforce in exchange for gains that have steadily built a new discipline within English studies. Some of these gains have been impressive—new programs, degrees, and departments—and it is increasingly clear that rhet-comp has opened productive, often healthy relationships with communities, disciplines, and institutions over the past four decades. A less palatable element of rhet-comp’s bargain with power, including some of its most dramatic institutional successes, is its granting of doctorates structurally similar in some ways to doctorates in education, producing a tenured class of lower administration—as well as a graduate faculty producing both the PhD-holding supervisory class and at least some of the teachers without doctorates (though many of the latter are trained in literary studies and creative writing; rhet-comp supervisors commonly function to provide on-the-job training to holders of literature degrees who have been trained to have contempt for rhetoric and composition). As I have previously written (Bousquet 2008), from the point of view of large trends in higher education employment, rhet-comp’s successes are too often and too complacently the avant-garde of the administrative imaginary, with as little tenure for nonadministrators as possible: at its worst, it resembles the worst form of K–12 teaching, in which a stratum of administrator-researchers sets the curriculum and mission for a subordinated teaching force.

To outsiders, it is generally obvious that English departments have much to gain by investing heavily in the figure of writing. The near-universal digitization of professional, academic, commercial, personal, and creative writing represents a world-historical shift in textuality, communications, and creativity. Over the past two decades, tens of millions of us have been engaged in the massive shared project of composing for hypermedia, the collective bringing into existence of a massively multiauthorial electronically

mediated textual object—the not quite worldwide artifact known as “the Web” or “the Internet.” Leaving aside the narrower, readerly questions of what to do with changing and disappearing digital texts (how and whether they should be read, valued, interpreted, archived, canonized, attributed, and monetized), English has a profound and inevitable investment in the process of their composition: countless acts of assemblage, interpretation, expression, analysis, debate, and persuasion.

As observers from a broad spectrum outside English agree, hypermedia composition represents a powerful intersection of research, teaching, and service: not only is the accelerating evolution of hypertextuality a gripping research object in its own right, it also represents fascinating possibilities for the mediation of other research and the relationship among archival texts, critical texts, and the discourse of learners, appreciators, imitators, and appropriators of those texts. My special hope and interest is that the production, and not simply the consumption, of culture will be democratized. One could say much about how this prospect is exaggerated or, where viable, rapidly foreclosed by law, convention, and the increasingly naked class struggle from above. The democratization of the expensive and complex literacies represented by hypermedia composition is too often taken for granted, as if everyone’s kids and everyone’s grandparents were doing it, when that is not at all true. It seems to me that faculty in English have not just an opportunity but an obligation to be prominent advocates for public support of this literacy, so that it in fact becomes democratic.

Despite this efflorescence of extracurricular composition—writing, writing, everywhere!—disciplinary trajectories in English have reduced the figure of writing to the figure of student writing, or first-year composition. This is unfortunate, though not because student writing is uninteresting. To the contrary, student writing has become more interesting than ever: the soaring quantity and diversity of contemporary writing by students and the institutional and social possibilities for that writing more closely than ever resemble the ever-less-obviously “literary” research objects of research scholars in English studies (those who have taken the cultural turn at least: in my own department, some of the most interesting work is being done on economic writers; Pacific revolutionary discourse; nineteenth-century elocution and reform; contemporary management theory; self-help, leadership, and spirituality; eighteenth-century sermons and other religious speech; and headmistress memoir—and headmistresses with the souls of accountants, not poets).

To anyone outside of English, it would seem abundantly reasonable

to say that all of these researchers are interested in writers and writing, rather than litterateurs and literature. Only the disciplinary division of labor makes sense of shoehorning these research agendas into work done by “literature faculty” with “literature doctorates.” Indeed, these are interests also being worked on by faculty in the other fields of English, including, especially, rhetoric and composition, where research into student writing is just one of many possible paths of inquiry. What this work by our “lit faculty” and scholars with “lit PhDs” underscores is the false distinction, useful to power, of “literature” versus “writing,” where faculty under both signs do work steadily more inflected by cultural studies, women’s studies, ethnic studies, and critical pedagogy, with a shared interest in questions of theory, interdisciplinarity, civic engagement, democracy, education, and literacy.

Embracing the figure of writing could be a tremendous opportunity for the expansion of mission, disciplinary healing, and employment justice in English. This would mean healing and transcending how the figure currently functions in the disciplinary division of labor and rewards—a significant task with significant rewards, including pragmatic considerations for departments in day-to-day university politics.

As an intellectual matter we have long settled the major questions: we have historicized the emergence of literary and cultural value and the emergence of specific forms enjoying the designation “literature,” and we understand the contingency of those forms and related practices such as literary criticism. Much of this work was accomplished in the late 1980s and early 1990s by faculty working in critical pedagogy and cultural studies; some were based in literature, like Pat Brantlinger, and others in composition, like James Berlin (2003 [1996]: 180), who considered that “research projects in literary studies attempted by those presently working in a rhetorically constructed English studies” showed “striking parallels” to the work at Birmingham, even where there had been “little or no communication between the two groups.”

Much more slowly, but inevitably, we are moving toward pragmatic disciplinary and curricular accommodations of that decades-old recognition, so eventually someone currently designated a literature scholar might feel comfortable saying, “I study writers and writing, some of which has enjoyed the designation ‘literature’ at one point or another, and much of which has not. Everybody in my department, whether they are on research-intensive or teaching-intensive appointment, is interested in writers and writing.” My sense is that we will get to that place eventually and that getting there sooner and willingly would represent a happier, healthier, and more productive journey for us all.

Secession, Fusion, and Compromise

There is a substantial tradition of thinking about this problem from below — especially from the most subordinated position, of writing. Most of the more prescient and convincing accounts come from scholars reimagining English studies from the disciplinary location of rhetoric and composition. The most circulated analysis in this vein is Stephen North’s (2000) account of a mid-nineties reform of the doctoral program at SUNY-Albany, which presents a taxonomy of prescriptions for disciplinary change (principally by way of reorganizing graduate study) going back to a 1984 summit meeting at Wayzata, Minnesota. As the accounts by North and others have it, discussants representing the major disciplinary associations in English studies made three sorts of proposal for the future: (1) *secession*, in which disaffected faculty would establish programs and departments of their own (or join established departments and programs that would treat them better); (2) *compromise*, in which the discipline and individual departments would seek a unifying term for tactical and pragmatic purposes (*rhetoric* was especially favored in the eighties); and (3) *fusion*, in which departments and possibly the profession would go beyond a merely rhetorical unification and transform themselves “into a single new entity, one quite distinct from any of the original components” (North 2000: 73). The result of the “fusion” effort at Albany was the department’s much-reported PhD program in writing, teaching, and criticism.

An especially useful commentary on North is Bruce McComiskey’s immensely approachable introductory essay to *English Studies: An Introduction to the Disciplines* (2006). McComiskey updates North by discussing additional fields and adding a fourth possible prescription, *integration*, by which he means acknowledging that the various fields have developed different methods and interests — different disciplinary or protodisciplinary discourses, hence the plural *disciplines* — but nonetheless may have a mutual interest in the health of an umbrella field, that is, “reimagining English studies as a coherent community of disciplines” (41). Rather than fusion, McComiskey proposes something more like a federation, in which the different fields recognize methodological and intellectual autonomy but in a relationship of rough equality — which might mean, he points out, rearticulating the relationship among the disciplines in the many departments where literary studies holds most of the power. What is most attractive about McComiskey’s proposal is the unifying rubric he offers: “The goal of this integrated English studies should be the analysis, critique and production of discourse in social context” (43). Missing from McComiskey’s account is the critical analysis of

disciplinarity itself offered by North (2000), David Downing (2002, 2005), Berlin (2003 [1996]), and many others, including me (Bousquet 2008), especially with attention to labor practice.

I prefer to read both McComiskey's and North's taxonomies not as prescriptions for the future but as reasonably good descriptions of four different tactics that have been utilized by many departments over the past three decades, often in very different flavors and combinations, sometimes as the result of reflection and planning, sometimes organically, frequently in a series of ad hoc decisions arising out of externally framed opportunities, strictures, and imperatives. McComiskey's federated model of English studies, for instance, turns out to be a decent description of where North's SUNY-Albany PhD program ended up. The fusion represented by North and C. H. Knoblauch's doctoral program, Writing, Teaching, and Criticism, lasted over a decade but in recent years gave way to a more conventional "PhD in English" with four tracks or concentrations: roughly literature, theory, writing, and cultural studies. Some of the fusion language of the 1992 effort survives in the program and in university documents. Across the discipline, however, probably the most important form of "fusion" has taken place in the research and teaching of individual faculty, where cultural studies, theory, women's studies, and ethnic studies easily pass across the border that "writing" and "literature" have fortified against each other.

These four tactics have been used in different mixes at institutions of all types. Among the iterations of McComiskey's federation or integration strategy is the rapid proliferation of writing tracks, minors, and concentrations at undergraduate institutions, even undergraduate-only liberal arts colleges. The twenty-one hundred students of Allegheny College (in Meadville, Pennsylvania), for instance, can choose from four separate writing tracks in the English major—technical and professional, journalism, creative, and the new environmental writing track. Similarly, though by way of a secession from English of a stand-alone writing program, any of the eighteen thousand students at the University of California, Santa Barbara, can elect a minor in professional writing offering distinct tracks in multimedia, editing, and business communication. Brown University's undergraduate English department has a concentration and honors program in nonfiction writing. Hundreds of such "integrations" exist, some of them involving elements of secession—many of the growing number of stand-alone writing programs remain functionally integrated with English departments on multiple levels, from joint appointments and initiatives to administering teaching fellowships for English graduate study.

The forms of secession are equally diverse. Some of the secessions are of the deplorable sort that feature a wholly untenurable labor force, as at Duke, Princeton, and Stanford, though these, too, can be integrated with English departments at a variety of levels—for instance, at Stanford, where the English department hosts the tenure of the stand-alone program’s administrator (but of no one else with a research profile in rhet-comp). In stark contrast, the secession of the Syracuse writing program led to department status, a substantially tenured faculty, an exceptionally well-conceived writing major and minor, and a respected doctorate.

It is not at all clear that the English department at Syracuse has benefited from this secession. While the department includes notable scholars in literature and cultural studies, it has just over a dozen doctoral candidates and fewer students in its master’s program; the departmental self-description is an object lesson in how difficult it is to describe English without the frame of writing, and it gives the sense of manning the barricades: “We are a dedicated group of faculty and students who represent the complex discipline that ‘English’ has become in the contemporary university and in today’s society” (Syracuse University English Department 2009).

By contrast, the new writing major is framed in terms I would call confident and clear:

The Writing and Rhetoric Major focuses on different genres and practices of writing as enacted in specific historical and cultural contexts. Students write in a wide range of genres: advanced argument, research writing, digital writing, civic writing, professional writing, technical writing, creative nonfiction, and the public essay. In the process of exploring and practicing these genres, students study and analyze the interaction of diverse rhetorical traditions and writing technologies and assess how these factors shape the nature, scope, and impact of writing in a variety of contexts. The major also asks students to examine writing and rhetoric as embedded in culture, and looks at writing identities, their emergences in cultures and subgroups, and the relations among writing, rhetoric, identity, literacy, and power. Graduates of the Writing and Rhetoric Major will be well equipped for public and private sector careers that require knowledge of advanced communication strategies and writing skills. The major is open to any SU student, and may be especially useful to students pursuing careers in teaching, the law, business, public advocacy, and editing and publishing. (Syracuse University Writing Program 2008)

I do not mean to suggest that the writing program is “better” than the English department, and I think it could easily be argued that the English department would be stronger as a unit if they could ever “re-integrate” as

McComiskey proposes. It is clear, however, that the achievements of the Syracuse University writing program would have been impossible in a department dominated by literature faculty.

Other secessions offer mixed narratives. Derek Owens's Institute for Writing Studies at St. John's University began with a wholly nontenurable (but full-time and unionized) faculty but within three years had converted all of the appointments to tenure-track assistant professorships — this in 2009, when nearly every institution of higher education was canceling tenure-track hires. Secessions at some institutions produce marriages of convenience, as in Michigan State's 2003 shotgun merger. Here, when the dust cleared, the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures (WRAC) offered one BA in American studies and another conceptually unrelated BA in professional writing, as well as all "tier 1" writing courses, while the English department held on to English education, most American literature faculty (including specialists in Chicana/Chicano culture), and creative writing, as well as the graduate programs (though English sent many of them to WRAC to fund their studies). Other English departments have seen multiple spin-offs, as at MIT, where linguistics long ago formed a happier partnership with philosophy, drama bunks down with music, and digital media have three homes (the programs in comparative media studies; science, technology, and society; and media arts and sciences). Literature at MIT stands alone, but the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies administers three majors (science writing, creative writing, and digital media) as well as three minors in the same fields, a concentration in writing that can be adapted to any field of study, the entire first-year writing program, and a graduate program in science writing.

I have said the least about North's "compromise" option, which is a bit of a misnomer. As a prescription, it sounds the least appetizing, because it involves one field taking managerial responsibility for the others, but at least — when framed as a choice — it sounds like a negotiation of complex circumstances among stakeholders. Considered as a description, however, it is probably the most accurate account of what has taken place over the long term: after literary criticism's ascent, as McComiskey (2006: 42) and many others observe, it retained control of most departments through most of the last century, with "the 'other' disciplines as trailers." Other unifying terms have been discussed — among them *rhetoric*, *cultural studies*, *literacy*, and *textual studies* — and many of these alternatives have been tried, especially in connection with acts of secession. However, these are the exceptions, and literature's ascent into its present position as the governing term did not proceed by negotiation.

Similarly, if some other governing term replaces *literature*, it will likely occur without the consent of literature faculty. Such a replacement is far from certain, of course. Literature, literary study, and the practice of criticism are not disappearing. In any reasonable estimation, literature will retain substantial cultural capital for centuries to come, with large groups of disproportionately wealthy and influential adherents. For the foreseeable future, it will continue to do enormous work in diversity and revisionist cultural history, and it will remain a centerpiece of great works, as well as core and juvenile curricula. It is hard to imagine that the large and growing number of students who enjoy writing will stop reading widely in the sort of imaginative works presently acknowledged as literary. And already — in innumerable acts of fusion by individual faculty — what counts as literary is being changed. We can expect hundreds more thoughtful, deliberate acts of integration by departments and colleges. Some of these integrations will be motivated by the achievements of secession. Other integrations will be motivated by fear of community-college-style consolidation into generalist “humanities” or “liberal studies” departments.

But if literature’s survival is not in question, the terms under which it survives certainly are. It may well be the case, for instance, that literature survives under the sign of “teaching,” and writing becomes the figure under which research-intensive appointments are distributed. Whether voluntary, forced, or negotiated, most of those changes will loosen literature’s grip on disciplinary power — and most will involve the figure of writing.

Note

1. The MLA produced this report at the paid invitation of the activist Teagle Foundation (whose interests include religion on campus and outcomes assessment for the humanities, “continuous improvement in teaching practices,” etc.). Not every element of the report is objectionable. However, its overall vision is profoundly nostalgic, aggressively promoting a regressive understanding of English studies as literary study cum sustained close reading (of “complex literary objects,” narrowly understood) over the many other legitimate concerns and practices of the field today. The recommendation that got the most press was to make foreign-language acquisition part of the English major. The most important recommendation that has not been widely discussed is the report’s endorsement of “the adoption of outcomes measurements.”

Most relevant in this forum is the report’s revealing anxiety about the future of literary study:

The role of literature needs to be emphasized. Sustained, deep engagements with literary works and literary language open perceptions of structure, texture,

and the layering of meanings that challenge superficial comprehension, expand understanding, and hone analytic skills. The literary object offers itself to observation and deciphering through narrative techniques, internal clues, and external references that beckon the curiosity and intelligence of readers. As readers become cognizant of the complexities of the linguistic system—its codes, structures, and articulations—they become mindful of language and of languages as evolving, changing historical artifacts and institutions, intricately bound up with the cultures expressed through them. Students also become sensitive to narrative strategies, verbal manipulations, and linguistic seductions—in short, to communication in all its powers and limitations. While we advocate incorporating into the major the study of a variety of texts, we insist that the most beneficial among these are literary works, which offer their readers a rich and challenging—and therefore rewarding—object of study. Our cybernetic world has brought us speed and ease of information retrieval; even where the screen has replaced paper, however, language still remains the main mode of communication. Those who learn to read slowly and carefully and to write clearly and precisely will also acquire the nimbleness and visual perceptions associated with working in an electronic environment. (ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major 2009: 3–4)

I should say that I think it appropriate for the MLA to urge the study of literature and to make partnerships with foundations that want to encourage that activity. But is this the way to do it, begging core questions on a colossal scale, such as “What is this object, literature, and the literary language of which you speak?” How did electronically mediated and electronically native texts become the “other” of this undefined but you-know-it-when-you-see-it thing, literature? And given the report’s embrace of empirical research in pedagogy, I would be interested in any empirical support its authors could provide for insisting that they know which kinds of texts are the “most beneficial” objects of study.

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With the long-term decline in the cultural capital of literature and a steep decline in tenure-track hires in literary studies, faculty across English are rethinking their relationship to writing. As interest in digital media grows, together with rising enrollment in courses in creative, civic, and professional composition, can the figure of writing provide a sense of disciplinary coherence? What will it take for literature faculty to agree that they, too, are interested in writers and writing?

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