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ABSTRACT

All English teachers share an occasional uneasiness about whether English really matters. Three major sources for this uneasiness are: (1) English teachers are uncertain about their basic purpose. Historically, the emphasis in the English profession has shifted from sharing the best that has been thought and said, to literary history, to rigorous literary analysis, to the function and relevance of the literary work. (2) English teachers are uncertain about the parameters of their subject matter. (3) English teachers are uncertain whether English is essential to the life of our time. In fact, the English profession does have a unique and essential service to offer: training students to read, for pleasure and stimulation as well as understanding, and to write every type of written discourse. English subject matter should be everything in writing that is the product of the verbal imagination, and teachers must be flexible enough to suit the material to the students and to build bridges between popular works and traditionally admired works. The undergraduate program should focus on training students in the arts of reading and writing; graduate programs should stress the acquisition of skills for future occupations, rather than subject matter; and, increasingly, the obligation of the profession should extend to adults throughout society who seek intellectual stimulation. (GW)

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English--or What?

John C. Gerber

It is relatively easy to become euphoric about our profession when attending this annual extravaganza of the MLA, or its Thanksgiving counterpart of the NCTE. There are probably 11,000 registered here, and there were 6,000 attending the NCTE meetings in Chicago. Old friends seem not to be much older. The old jokes do not seem much worse than they did last year. Not too many more have divorced their spouses to take off with graduate students. And many seem quite able to pay New York prices.

Consider other evidences of peace and prosperity. The MLA claims a membership of 29,000, and an annual budget of 1 1/2 million--a budget that this year boasts a surplus. The NCTE claims some 86,000 members and subscribers, and a budget, almost balanced, of 2 1/4 million. Including the Executive Council the MLA has twenty boards, commissions, and committees; the NCTE, like Mr. Heinz, advertizes fifty-seven. Hovering in the shadows of these two gigantic organizations are the regional MLA's and the state English councils. There are the CEA and the CLA and the ADE. There are the distinguished societies representing special interests, such as the American Comparative Literature Association, the American Dialect Society, the American Folklore Society, the American Name Society, the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies, the American Studies Association, the Association of Teachers of English as a Second Language, the Augustan Reprint Society--and I haven't even reached the Bibliographical Society, let alone the Scottish Text Society and the Thoreau Society. Truly Thoreau would accuse us of being a gregarious bunch; a collection of Odd Fellows he would say.

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Let me push forward with my litany of numbers. There are some 1500 departments of English in our universities and four-year colleges, though some have been translated into departments of Humanities, Communication, Cultural Studies, or simply Language. In addition, there are some 1600 departments of English in our two-year institutions though these are frequently called departments of Humanities, Language Arts, Communications, Language and Culture, and Language and Literature. Hacking through the semantics we can say that there are well over 3,000 departments in which writing and/or reading of literature is taught.

One more item: research and publication. The PMLA Bibliography for 1974 contains 15,394 entries in Volumn I alone: 15,394 articles, monographs, and books on General, English, American, Medieval, Neo-Latin, and Celtic Literatures; and Folklore. Assuming, say, an average of twenty pages a work, the 8 1/2 by 11 sheets of typing, if placed end to end, would stretch 53.45 miles. Truly we belong to a huge, vigorous, productive, and gallant company!

Looking only at such statistics, in short, we can feel strongly encouraged about the state of the profession. Yet, if we scratch the statistical veneer ever so slightly we experience an uneasiness that is both sharp and deep. Suddenly we are not so confident about the future as the figures would suggest that we should be. In our more sober moments we wonder if all this activity may not be, at least in part, a means of escaping from the harsher truths of our profession. Why all this frenetic activity? Why, for example, write another paper on Love's Labour Lost? To be sure, it adds to our information, offers us material for a class discussion, wins a smattering of approbation, and gives us such immortality as a bibliographical entry provides. But maybe such activity is especially valuable because it keeps us busy and thus quiets our consciences when they begin to annoy us by asking whether English is something that really matters.

Whence this deep uneasiness that we all share from time to time? I would suggest at least three major sources for it: we are uncertain about our basic purpose in teaching English; we are uncertain about out subject matter; and hence we are uncertain about our rôle in society. For a few minutes I should like to consider each of these uncertainties.

First, our uncertainty about our basic purpose as teachers of English. In the history of our profession, now a matter of a hundred years or so, we have successively advertized our basic purpose in such words as these: to have our students experience the best that has been thought and said; to have them understand and appreciate their linguistic and literary heritage; to help them develop the art of rigorous literary analysis; and, under pressure from the students themselves in the late 1960's, to aid students in finding their way in an alien world. Usually we have added, as something of an after-thought, to help them write clearly.

Obviously no one of these stated purposes is comprehensive enough to suggest the range of our activities. Nor does any one of them satisfactorily provide an adequate focus for that range. Nor does any of them seem significant enough to convince us that we are vitally important to the survival and well being of the race. Each of our enthusiasms--and I have named only the most obvious--has had its values, and each has had manifest limitations. None has been able to serve adequately and continuously as the basic purpose of this activity we call English. Let me be more specific about them.

The moral or humanistic explanation of our function, the one stressing our desire to share with our students the best that has been thought and said, had much in its favor. Its aim was high and its appeal, especially in the nineteenth century, was broad. Those who worked by it realized that the issues raised by literature are ultimately moral issues, and so they encouraged the students to read the literary work not as a relic out of the past but as a message designed for their moral and spiritual growth. These teachers concerned themselves primarily with the function of the literary work, not its form. There was a community of spirit among them at all educational levels since they shared the common purpose of turning out "improved" young men and women.

Even with such advantages, however, this moral-humanistic approach could not last forever. The theory was too dogmatic and the teaching too didactic. Too often it produced prudes instead of persons of broad vision. In their literary journals, for example, undergraduates in English, while praising Matthew Arnold and Idolizing Milton, would chide Mark Twain for being trivial and offensive. Ultimately the attempt to inculcate high thinking through literature crumpled under the impact of those step-children of German science, philology and literary history.

Well before the turn of the century college catalogues began announcing that the purpose of English was to have students master English literature from the "beginnings to 1800." This was later emended to read "from the beginnings to 1900," and finally in the more daring departments to "English and American literature from the beginnings to the present." Instead of that catch expression "the best that has been thought and said," the sacred work became "coverage." The concern shifted from the function of the literary work to its place in the literary and linguistic continuum. This stress on literary history brought many fruitful changes, the chief being that teaching became less didactic, and that students specializing in English did develop something of a sense for their literary tradition.

Even so appealing an objective as the mastery of our literary tradition, however was not fully satisfactory. There were--and are--too many limitations, too many unfortunate results. The historical approach took the emphasis off the literary work itself and put it on influences, movements, genres, and the authors and their families and friends. In the late twenties, when literary history held the field unchallenged, I had a course in American literature that we used to call "the white picket fence course" because the instructor, whenever he had a chance, would remind us that

Emerson or Whittier or whoever lived in a house surrounded by a white picket fence. In the early thirties in my first seminar I was assigned a paper on the first third of the life of Edgar Allan Poet--those years, that is, before he began to write.

Under the influence of German scientism, literary study turned to classification, and classification led to specialization, and specialization encouraged less and less concern with the basic problems of English education. The results are all around us today. I am sure that the great majority of persons at this convention have come to discuss their specialties, not the larger issues of teaching English. Look at the multiplicity of the divisions: 69 of them; even more dramatic is the increasing popularity of the narrowly focused Special Sessions: 60 of them this year. I am not arguing against the desirability of narrow interests--I have mine too. What I am protesting is that they have been allowed to set up a screen between us and the larger intellectual and educational issues that we face. (To the credit of the MLA leaders, however, it should be added that in their forums and ADE meetings they are trying to encourage discussion of the larger issues.)

There, have been, it seems to me, even more profoundly unfortunate effects of the preoccupation with literary history. The esoteric material that we began unearthing and classifying and accounting for resulted in an unhealthy pride in special knowledge. If English had not been an elitist profession before, it become one with the advent of philology and literary history. Moreover, a pecking order developed in our departments based on how esoteric a scholar's material was. It is still true in many departments that specialists in modern American literature do well to remain silent when the medievalists speak. And those interested in popular literature or composition do well not to ~~open their~~ mouths at all. This elitism opened a gulf between ourselves and teachers in the secondary and elementary schools that still yawns wide. And it developed an even greater gulf between ourselves and the public at large. After all, how can we talk to the man in the street, we asked ourselves with some complacency, when he cares so little about the ur-Hamlet or the linguistics niceties of Sir Thomas Browne? As I heard one distinguished scholar put it not long ago, it is our function to produce gentlemen. Both the credits and liabilities of literary history remain with us. On balance it has proved itself a useful approach to literacy study but not by itself an adequate foundation for the profession. Besides, by the 1930's and 40's many of us had tired of it, and hence welcomed the New Criticism with unreserved enthusiasm.

With the coming of literary analysis, whether it was called New Criticism, Neo-Aristotelianism, or what, the basic purpose of our teaching became the encouragement of rigorous reading. The emphasis changed from the function or place of the literary work to its form. Anyone who lived through the beginnings of this change in emphasis will recall the tremendous stir it caused. Traditional scholars viewed it as a plague, but probably the majority of the profession, especially the majority of younger scholars, welcomed it as a partial escape from the rigidities of literary history. We and the students were going to look at the work itself again! And look at it we did, first through a magnifying glass and then through a miscroscope. We observed the relation of parts to one another and to the whole. We found in most works that the ending was inevitable given the beginning and middle. (Of course there was an occasional embarrassment, as in the case of Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger when it was discovered, after impressive analyses by New Critics, that Mark Twain never finished the work, and that this so-called inevitable ending had been tacked on to the story by Clemens' literary executor.) Under the influence of the New Criticism we became symbol ferrets. How happy we were when we found a character with the initials J.C. because these clearly indicated that the Christian myth underlay the story somehow. The fact that the character with those initials might be an unmitigated louse bothered us not a whit; this fact simply showed how rich the text was in irony and paradox.

I would not downgrade too harshly this training in rigorous reading. It remains with us and should remain with us. It results in more careful reading, in lively classroom discussion, in a deeper appreciation of the writer's craft, and in a greater apprehension of the principles of art. Furthermore it made it possible for us to teach the non-majors more successfully. But critical analysis, like literary history, is too limited a foundation upon which to build our profession. It does not easily accomodate itself to some of our finest works such as "Song of Myself" and Moby-Dick. It drains the literary work of its vital juices, making it only a specimen to be viewed as dispassionately as the geologist views a rock. As Richard Ohmann has pointed out, in his provocative book on

English in America, under the influence of the New Criticism people become characters, feelings turn into attitudes, and ideas get emasculated into themes. So well indoctrinated did our students become that they would get irate if asked if they believed what a writer had to say. Belief was not to be involved; only description. If the New Criticism resulted in a higher place in the professional pecking order for literary critics, it did little to diminish the elitist tendencies in the profession since it provided only another type of esoteric learning. It created tantalizing intellectual and aesthetic activity but activity that was essentially juiceless.

The juice was supplied by the students in the later nineteen-sixties and early seventies when they told us in rich aromatic terms that they no longer wanted the dead past of the literary historians or the lifeless analyses of the critics. They wanted relevance: literature that stirred the blood and churned up the mind. Those were especially exciting days because at long last the literary work could be offered as something to be experienced by the total personality, the entire psycho-physiological being. In effect, the students hauled us back to the emphasis on the function of the literary work. The question was not only what does Melville have to say in Moby-Dick but how fiercely does it grab you. New life poured into the English classroom, and so did the students. Maybe our main function was to help students find their individual ways in a world they felt alien if not malign. but of course it wasn't--at least not wholly. Relevance was too shadowy a criterion, and student interests change too quickly. Once the Vietnam War came to a halt, "relevance" dropped out of the student vocabulary. But the interlude was of enormous value. It revealed in startling clarity the limitations of our previous enthusiasms, and it brought the world into our classrooms and cracked our elitist tendencies. It is one of those incredible ironies that we should have benefited from the disasters in Vietnam.

Another irony is that during the whole hundred years of our existence as a profession the public at large apparently never suspected the notions we harbored about our fundamental purpose. All along they felt they knew what our purpose is: to get the students to write and speak good English. Invariably, as you well know, when you are introduced as an English teacher the other person will remark that he will have to watch his grammar--by which he means his usage. How amazing and disconcerting that for a hundred years the public and we have almost totally disagreed on what we are about. We do well to be uneasy about the nature of our basic purpose.

I shall spend less time on what I conceive to be the other major sources of uneasiness in the profession. If we have never been able to settle on our basic purpose, we have never agreed either about the parameters of our subject matter. There have been valiant attempts to do so. Back in the 1950's the Curriculum Commission of the NCTE published a whole series of books on the teaching of English--to no great effect that I could see, at least at the college level. In the same decade the MLA under the direction of George Winchester Stone sponsored the Basic Issues Conference at the Gould mansion up the Hudson. I remember the conference well for two reasons. One was the bathroom built for Mrs. Gould that consisted of sixteen sides, each side a huge mirror. There was something awesome, I can tell you, about brushing your teeth in a room with sixteen sides, all mirrors. My other reason for remembering the Basic Issues Conference is that we bogged down on the very first issue, What is English? The ultimate answer satisfied no one.

In the mid 1960's the CEEB and the NDEA Summer Institutes developed an operational definition of sorts by confining themselves to courses in writing, language, and literature. They called it the tripod. But then cynics began asking what the tripod supported. The best answer I heard was that the tripod supported our families. Then, just recently the NCTE "Statement on the Preparation of Teachers of English and Language Arts" declared that English "includes whatever one does with language," a definition that seems to create more problems than it solves.

The chief difficulty, of course, is that our subject matter has been constantly shifting. Until recently it would have been more exact to say that it has been eroding. Originally under the rubric of English we taught the great works of religion and philosophy. But as our forefathers in the field became more exclusively interested in belles lettres, these works were willingly surrendered to faculties in other fields. Professor R.S.Crane used to teach magnificent courses in Locke and Hume, but to the best of my knowledge he was the last English professor to do so.

Similarly, we surrendered the great works of rhetoric--works by Aristotle, Quintilian, and Burke--to the speech people when they started pulling away from English some sixty years ago.

We have held on to Aristotle's Poetics but have acted as though his Rhetoric is wholly foreign to our concerns. Along with rhetoric we have surrendered oral interpretation to the Speech teachers and, more recently, communication and communication research.

The list goes on. In most schools the theater is outside English with the result that Shakespeare is generally read in our classes as though it were closet drama. A recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education made a big to-do of the fact that a few teachers of English are having students read Shakespeare aloud and act out portions of the plays. The implication was that this was a great experiment. It has become an experiment to read Shakespeare aloud in English classes!

We have surrendered journalistic writing to the journalism departments, linguistics to the new and vigorous linguistic departments, and comparative literature to comparative literature programs or departments. The last was a special blow because with comparative literature went the most recent and exciting work in critical theory. There was a time in the 1920's when English almost lost American literature. And it has not been too long since many departments were trying to rid themselves wholly of the teaching of writing.

The process of erosion has largely halted if for no other reason than that there is not much left to erode. Now we are adding subject matter almost hysterically, not because we have adopted a new philosophy of education but because we need the registrations that these subject matters bring. You know what I mean, courses in ethnic studies, women's studies, literature and film, popular literature, literature and sex, gay literature, the erotic hero, and courses involving literature and science, literature, and psychoanalysis, literature and art, and so on. I am not being critical of such courses because many of them have a rightful place in the college curriculum. My point is that just ten years ago we would not have touched most of them with the proverbial ten-foot pole; rather, we would have encouraged their sponsors to go to other departments or to create programs or departments of their own. Now for practical purposes we embrace them warmly, only occasionally asking ourselves the disturbing question: What Is English?

A third reason for our current uneasiness, it seems to me, is our undertainty about our role not only in the academy but in society at large. If we cannot feel confident about our purpose and our subject matter in the academy, how can we feel confident about our role in society itself?

To put it bluntly, is English essential to the life of our time? In recent years I have known not just those seeking jobs but some with jobs, quite good ones, voicing the opinion that what we do is essentially trivial. Several of these have left the academy; others are teaching with their left hands, so to speak, and spending the bulk of their days participating in ecological, community, and political activities. I am not talking about those who want nothing more than a color TV and a can of Schlitz; I'm talking about energetic, conscientious, intelligent people who no longer feel that English can provide them with an outlet for their lives that they believe useful. I suspect that from time to time most of us have shared this belief, however fleetingly.

Certainly society gives us little encouragement to think otherwise. At the moment, as you well know, we are experiencing one of those periodic attacks on our alleged inability to teach Johnny to read or to write. Testers discover a marked decline in the competence of seventeen-year olds; newspapers pundits flaunt examples of linguistic arabesques; and parents at PTA meetings and cocktail parties bewail the incompetence of their offspring. It's just too bad, we have all heard over and over again, that Latin is no longer available in the high schools. Latin teachers knew how to teach English. Even in our own halls, professors of Engineering and Microbiology criticize the English of their students, implying that English, as presently taught, is a failure. We can think of appropriate answers: that some tests show no decline in competence, that the tests themselves are suspect; that in the limited time we have the students we cannot be expected to overcome the bad habits developed in the home and on street corners; that the achievement of competence in such subtle arts as reading and writing requires reinforcement in all college courses. But as you well know, our answeres, however cogent, don't get the publicity that the criticism does.

As for our teaching of literature, the public continues to support it but not wholly to believe in it. We can blame this, as we are wont to do, on the alleged insensitivity, the anti-intellectualism, of the average American. But our own elitist attitudes are also to blame. Over the years we have made it much too clear that we are engaged in something for the cultured few; and for the most part we have gotten into the habit of talking only to ourselves--even only to those interested in our own specializations. The Spenserians, to paraphrase, talk only to Miltonists, and the Miltonists only to God. As for the post-structuralists and the Derrida fans, they speak in strange tongues and to whom I don't know. Should any of us make a practice of writing articles for popular magazines or newspapers, we would immediately have our academic chevrons ripped off. Imagine the horror in the academy should one of our senior colleagues publish an article on Coleridge in Playboy. What lust is this, we would ask, that you have been secreting in your heart?

Whatever the reasons, we are not the public's darlings. In fact, we fast seem to be becoming its rejects. Students no longer seek out our courses as they once did, a fact that your dean and your registrar have probably brought to your attention more than once. As a matter of fact, we can hope that the dean and the registrar have not analyzed the figures too carefully. Once they do, we are in for additional trouble. For in many, maybe most departments, our FTE's are as high as they are because of the classes in writing and in film, ethnic studies, and women's studies. Were the deans to compare present enrollments in our traditional literary period and genre courses with what they once were, English as we have known it would definitely be edging toward the nearest academic exit.

Worst of all, though, society through its legislatures and regents and trustees is rejecting us by not providing the funds for jobs for our most highly trained graduates. Our field does not suffer alone in this respect, but it probably suffers most acutely. We are much to blame by failing to reduce the supply because of a reduced demand, but the fact remains that if society were willing to pay for the number of teachers really needed to teach English as it should be taught --in small classes, that is--there would be enough jobs for all of our graduates, with many openings left unfilled. I need not remind anyone here that this is not the case, and that our graduates, many of them, suffer both anxiety and humilation. I heard one of them the other day wonder wistfully how long it might take to get a degree in veterinary medicine.

I suppose it is now time, as Whitman would say, "to explain myself." If I were a committed Transcendentalist I would go on to the next lines:

> What is known I strip away,
> I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown."
>
> "Song of Myself," 44.

Being a good deal less sure of myself than Whitman was of himself, let me say that I now launch _myself_ forward into the Unknown. What follows is not as revolutionary as Karl Marx or even Whitman would have it be. Rather, it is simply a plea for common sense.

Let us start where all educational considerations should always start: with our contemporaries. Do we have a service to offer our contemporaries that is unique and essential for their well being? The answer is yes. We have had such a service to offer every since the beginning of our profession. And in one fashion or another we have been offering it. But consciously or subconsciously over the years we have taken pains to hide the fact from both the public and from ourselves. For the service is nothing more and nothing less than training our contemporaries to read and write.

By writing I mean every type of written discourse from the simplest sentence wrestled over in writing laboratories to the most subtle kind of imaginative work produced in our creative writing workshops. The term implies not only exposition but rhetoric, scientific and technical writing, business and professional writing, film and TV scenario writing, poetry and fiction writing, satire, and humor and burlesque, and whatever other modes are current and desired. By reading I mean not attention to such concerns of the psychologist as eye fixation and reading rate, but the reading of texts for pleasure and stimulation as well as understanding. Depending on the maturity of the students the texts can vary from Frankie and Johnny to Finnegan's Wake.

As I intimated above, we have been at pains to cover up the fact that we are basically teachers of reading and writing, probably because we find it more assuaging to the ego to call ourselves Romanticists or Johnsonians than teachers of reading and writing. Writing we have called composition, rhetoric, or exposition and have assigned instruction in it largely to graduate assistants and staff members low on the scale of prestige. Reading we have dolled up by calling it "critical reading" or obscured it altogether by calling it "practical criticism." Yet we are teachers of reading, pure and simple, whether we have students practice Middle English pronunciation, or explore the theme of Hamlet or determine the organization of Tom Jones, or look for the movement in an Emersonian essay, or examine Mardi as Melville's batting practice for Moby-Dick, or compare Tom Sawyer with the young Sam Clemens. No matter what our approach, we are basically concerned with the accurate reading of texts.

True, you may be willing to say, but so what? There is a big "so what," because if we can conceive of our basic task as training our contemporaries to read and write we have changed the context in which we think and work. We now have a context that brings us all together, Shakespearians and teachers of the fourth grade. We have a purpose that gives relation to all that we do. Whether we are historians, New Critics, or whatever, we are ultimately concerned with the same end: to help the students in reading a text to cut through the idiosyncrasies of the author, language, time, place, nationality, and literary form to the essential meaning. Seeing ourselves as teachers of reading and writing makes us a community again. Furthermore, we have a basic purpose that our contemporaries will accept as unique, since no other professional group is primarily concerned with it, and as essential since regardless of the MacLuans they recognize that the continuation of civilization depends upon the written word. Finally, and maybe most importantly of all, training our contemporaries to read and write is a basic purpose that *we* can see as necessary and vital. Who, we may well ask, performs a *more* necessary public service? Something like this, then, should be the opening sentence in our catalogue descriptions: The Department of English offers training in reading and writing in every mode and at every level of difficulty.

The next question is: To whom do we offer this training in reading and writing? Since we are engaged in post-secondary education, the answer should be everybody from 17 to 97: young Penrod there in the first row in English 100 and his great grandmother in the nursing home across town. Without a doubt we shall continue for some time to devote most of our effort to the young men and women who register for our classes but increasingly our obligation should extend to those who have completed their professional training and who are now active in their professions or to those who simply seek further intellectual stimulation wherever they may wish to come together--in public libraries, churches, prisons, nursing homes, factories, or offices. For these serious and eager people we cannot allow such instruction to be taken over by proprietary institutions, many of which are concerned only with the making of a fast buck. Except for some of our colleagues who teach in community colleges we have hardly begun to tap the possibilities of adult education. Yet such education is clearly one of our responsibilities--and one of our practical opportunities since adult education will require additional staff. I have seen one demographic study that concludes with the astonishing statement that "before the turn of the century the education of adults will become the principal purpose of American higher education." Here clearly is our best hope for improving our job mark

Now we come back to the "oldie": what is our subject matter? In this broader context the answer to this question should be equally broad: everything in writing that is the product of the verbal imagination; that is, of the mind when it is seriously concerned with form and effect as well as content. This is a conclusion reached last year by the NCTE's Commission on Literature, and I happily borrow it here. If English and Speech were not separated, we could say every product of the verbal imagination--as they can say in departments of Communication or Language Arts in which the written and the spoken word are both matters of concern. But the written word in all its forms is enough of a challenge for most of us for the time being.

Thus we make for ourselves a context for admitting courses in literature and film, literature and TV, scenario writing, popular literature, and all the others that we have in fact admitted but been uneasy about. The real challenge will be to remain flexible enough to suit the material to the students, and to build bridges between the popular and those works that we have traditionally most admired. Many of our colleagues in the community colleges have practiced this art for years. So now must we all, if we are to go public, so to speak, and train persons in reading and writing whoever they are and wherever they are. It will be instructive in more ways than one for a Shakespearian to deal with TV scenarios, for a Blake scholar to discuss hard-boiled realism with prison inmates, and for a distinguished poet to work with elderly ladies who want to write greeting card verses. But the experience will be good for our immortal souls, assuming that we have such, and it will make all of us much more human if not humane.

Still, for the foreseeable future, most of our activities will continue to occur in the conventional class room, and thus we shall continue to have to deal with the problems of degree programs. What of them if our basic function is to teach reading and writing, and our subject matter includes every written product of the verbal imagination?

I have space to mention only a few of the implications of what I have said for our curricula. The undergraduate program it seems to me, should be a liberal arts, non-professional program in which our primary concern is to train the students in the arts of reading and writing. Training in writing, as now, will probably have to begin with elementary composition but above this level there should be training in every mode and at every possible level of competence. There should be no distinction in these classes between majors and non-majors though careful attempts should be made to adapt the type and level of writing to the needs and capabilities of the individual student. If we are to meet even the present demands for training in writing we shall have to assign at least a third of our manpower to this field--this means a third of almost everyone's time; not a third of the department, meaning the youngest third.

Similarly the training program in reading should result in a series of experiences that enable students to hone their reading skills, especially skill in reading English and American literature. There are many ways in which this can be accomplished. I am particularly impressed with the idea of having the first level confined to the reading of individual texts, and the higher levels requiring the student successively to read texts in larger and more complex contexts. That is, the first level could be designed to make reading as appealing and intellectually tantalizing as possible. The next higher levels could require reading works in the context of genres, in the context of literary and cultural periods, and finally in interdisciplinary contexts in which literature is related to art, science, social problems, myth, or whatever. At no level, however, should the literary work be presented as a cold artifact; at every level the attempts should be to have the undergraduate read it as a personal message across time and space.

The graduate program I would make unabashedly professional. We have erred in my opinion in presuming that the undergraduate program should be primarily preparation for graduate training and that the graduate program in turn is nothing more than a continuation of the liberal arts training for undergraduates. The vast majority of our undergraduates have no intention of going on for graduate work in English, and the vast majority of our graduate students are such because they want to be trained for vocations in English or related fields. Hence it seems to me only common sense to base a graduate program on such propositions as these:

1. A graduate program is to prepare a student for an occupation.
2. It must therefore train students for the kinds of tasks that they will perform in their professional activities.
3. Most of the training, therefore, must be devoted to the acquisition of skills, not subject matter.
4. While subject matter is necessary, nothing like full coverage in any area is necessary since coverage is a life-long, on-the-job responsibility.

5. Graduate programs in English should be broad enough and flexible enough to prepare students not only for teaching but for every kind of professional work requiring expertly trained readers, researchers, and writers.

As you can see from these five propositions, I would place the stress in our graduate training on the acquisition of skills rather than subject matter. Students should leave our graduate classrooms able to perform the tasks that they will be required to perform in their vocations.

First of all, they themselves should be able to write well. Thus they need advanced training in rhetoric and stylistics and the theories of language and writing. More than that, they should have considerable training in writing itself, both critical and imaginative. In fact I would be willing to make the writing of English prose one of the tool skills, substituting it for one of the foreign languages we now require. If nothing else, such a requirement might result in the injection of more liveliness into our solemn journals.

Second, our graduate students should be trained in reading, and not on the hit and miss basis that now obtains. They should have considerable work in critical theory and critical practice. For example, they should be schooled in the principles and methodology of such fields as phenomenology, structuralism, semiotics, and hermeneutics; and, if possible, should have work in such allied fields as linguistics (including computer analyses) anthropology, aesthetics, and the psychology of learning. They should explore at length the special reading problems, not just the ideas, of English and American literature of every form and of selected literary periods

Third there should be more explicit and rigorous training in the techniques of research than we now offer in most departments. Research, it should be made clear, is a way of life in our profession, even for those who intend only to teach. For some quixotic reason we call it "research" if we are working on scholarly books or articles, but we call it "preparation" if we are digging up material for a class lecture or discussion. The usual dichotomy between teaching and research is therefore a false one. The only dichotomy is between research that leads to oral publication in the classroom and research that leads to printed publication in books and journals. To repeat, the techniques of research are an essential part of every graduate student's training. And by techniques I mean not just how to find a book in the local library or a government document in the Public Records Office, but how to evaluate material found, how to draw conclusions and inferences from it, how to reason on the basis of it, how to assemble it and present it cogently for a variety of audiences. There should be basic courses in these techniques and the techniques should be reinforced strongly in every graduate seminar.

Fourth, for the students planning to teach, there should be training in such arts as teaching, course organization, and testing at the college level. Already such training exists in many universities, many of the programs being very excellent indeed. Ideally, however, I would hope that there could be apprentice programs arranged whereby graduate students learn the rudiments of teaching not only in university classrooms but also in classrooms in two-year and four-year colleges. One of the reasons why community colleges don't want Ph.D.'s is that the Ph.D.'s seldom have any notion of the ambience of the two-year college, are not prepared for it, and in many cases quickly reject it.

It is only common sense to have the doctoral examinations designed to disclose how well the candidate has mastered these skills, not simple how well he has achieved coverage in approved literary periods. Moreover, both the M.A. and the Ph.D. candidate should be encouraged to make writing, the theories of writing, and the theories of teaching writing an area of specialization. English M.A.'s have been surprisingly successful finding positions when they can show that they have had intensive training in writing, and the last two MLA Job Information Lists indicate that those trained in the teaching of composition are in far greater demand than those specializing in any of the customary literary fields. The little moral of this fact should not go unnoticed by either graduate students or graduate faculties.

I see all of the changes I have recommended in this paper as based simply on common sense. They are changes which can be brought into being in the coming year. Although they are admittedly not ~~attractions~~ alterations that get at the basic problems of the power structure of American universities, they will have effects on the power structure in departments of English. The most valuable members of the department will no longer be those whose material is most esoteric and whose appeal is only to a small, elite group. Rather, the most valuable members will be those whose concern is with society as a whole and whose professional ambition is to train everyone who wishes such training to be clear writers and discerning and appreciative readers.

Do I foresee all such changes coming to pass in most departments in the near future? In a word, no. Most of us are too much the creatures of inertia, tradition, elitism, and sheer cussedness to be receptive to change, even such modest changes as I have outlined. The majority of our departments, I suspect, will be forced to make a few cosmetic alterations, adding a course in composition here, an adult education class there. Mostly, I am afraid, they will continue to proceed on the assumption that old ways are best, on the assumption that the pendulum will eventually swing back to those allegedly splendid programs that existed when they were undergraduates and graduate students in English.

A few departments who are so opulent that they can continue to indulge themselves as they wish, won't make any changes.

But there will be others, I hope, that will seriously ask themselves how they can best serve our contemporaries and that will reorder their work as best they can in order to do so. ~~These are the departments that will flourish and will deserve to flourish~~. These in my opinion are the departments that will make it possible for our profession to survive.