

# Exciting Discipline

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**D**ISCIPLINES ARE NOT SIMPLE THINGS. THEY ARE MAINLY IDENTIFIED WITH THE IDEAS and methods they produce, but ideas and methods can only be part of their overall constitution. Embedded in various kinds of institution, focussing on objects and topics that continually mutate, disciplines also professionalise and reproduce themselves by creating barriers to entry and hierarchising students. They legitimate themselves by ascribing particular cultural and social functions to themselves. They fracture into differing schools. And, of course, they teach.

In the case of a discipline like English, teaching itself has various components and choices: curricula, modes of delivery, assessments practices as well as programs and purposes (critical judgment? formal analysis? literary history?) are all open to negotiation and change.

Facing this complexity, historians have preferred to focus on the discipline's intellectual history, shunting both pedagogy and institutional factors aside. *The Teaching Archive* corrects this.<sup>1</sup> Rachel Sagna Buurma and Laura Heffernan offer us a path-breaking history of English focussed on what happened in classrooms,

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<sup>1</sup> Buurma, Rachel Sagner, and Laura Heffernan. *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2021.

or at least some of what happened in classrooms (they are uninterested in assessment for instance) so as to provide a new take on the discipline's past.

Drawing upon careful archival research, *The Teaching Archive* is based on particular case studies. Buurma and Heffernan begin canonically enough with T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks, but then give us illuminating accounts of rather less well known scholars and teachers, among them Caroline Spurgeon (who in 1913 became the first woman professor of English at the University of London and perhaps anywhere); Josephine Miles (a poet and, alongside Ernst Kantorowicz, a mentor to the so-called 'Berkeley renaissance' poets, who became the first woman to be tenured in English at Berkeley in 1940); J. Saunders Redding (the first Ivy League African American tenured literary professor), and the poet and pioneer in the study of native American literature, Simon J. Ortiz. What these teachers shared was a will to experiment. Richards, Spurgeon and Miles in particular developed new modes of literary analysis by collaborating one way or another with their students.

Buurma and Heffernan want to provide more than a case-study based history however. They have an ambitious argument to make. They want to persuade us that what happened in English literature classrooms significantly influenced scholarship and criticism, and, furthermore, that the intersection of pedagogy and research pushed the discipline in a collectivist, democratic direction.

*The Teaching Archive's* accounts of Spurgeon and Miles are convincing, and the book brings us a valuable new understanding of Eliot and Brooks too. But full consideration of Buurma and Heffernan's ambitious thesis concerning the importance of classroom interactions between teachers and students to the discipline's overall development needs more than specific case studies. It requires a broader view of disciplinary history. That Buurma and Heffernan don't provide, and why should they? it's not to their immediate purpose.

But maybe a broad stroke or two covering the discipline's early history can help us consider their project.

English literature was increasingly taught in the Anglophone world from the Napoleonic wars on, taking institutional form in universities and colleges in a gradual process which accelerated after about 1880 alongside political democratisation and state building. During this period, a mix of approaches was used in classrooms, but, as Carol Atherton has shown, a main emphasis was on teaching facts ('What were the major events during Shakespeare's boyhood?') presumably because facts were easily memorised and examined.

Thus the period's leading textbook, Stopford Brooke's *Primer of English Literature* (1876) mainly offered literary historical information. But it begins by asking 'what is literature?' and replying like this: 'By literature we mean the written thoughts and feelings of intelligent men and women arranged in a way that will give pleasure to the reader'. (5). That unambitious and capacious definition was already all but obsolete by 1880 however. In his *Analytics of Literature: A Manual for the Objective Study of English Prose and Poetry* (1893), another pioneering figure, the University of Nebraska's L. A. Sherman, explicitly corrected Brooke: 'literature is the sum of the thoughts and feelings or experience of the race that have been recognized as valuable beyond the moment of their first utterance and hence have been treasured up for further use.'

Perhaps unexpectedly, in making a quasi-Arnoldian claim for literature's cultural function, Sherman also turned to experimental science. He imagined his classroom to be a laboratory in which students were collaborators helping him to analyse how literary 'effects' can shape interiorities, or (in the language of the time) acquire *spiritual* power. This involved slow and difficult quantification of sentence length and syntax: the title of *The Decrease of Predication and of Sentence Weight*, a book by one of Sherman's students, hints at the approach's flavour.

Sherman may have established the 'scientific' procedures that both Spurgeon and Miles in their different ways continued. But, importantly, there was considerable resistance to this mechanisation of literary studies. Sherman's student the future novelist Willa Cather, for instance, mercilessly gayed the deadening effects of her teacher's obsession with quantification, scientisation and syntactical information.

My point is that Sherman's ability to reconcile an Arnoldian understanding of literature's cultural and spiritual value with an avowedly scientific approach was just one way of studying and teaching literature in the late nineteenth century. As is well known, the discipline was first academically legitimised by emphasising philology particularly in relation to Old and Middle English texts with their appeal to nationalism. At the same time, however, a pioneering academic critic like A. C. Bradley could apply a range of philosophic concepts to purely literary judgment and analysis. Or, to give one more example, Hiram Corson, a professor of English at Cornell, became famous in the 1870s by using dramatic recitations of poems first as a pedagogical technique and then on the lecture circuit, a procedure he validated by theorising the relation between voice, poetry and spirit in terms which took him into the kind of spiritualism that makes contact with the dead. For Corson, the literary teacher as a voice performer was in effect a spirit medium.

Literary studies' eclecticism, which meant that the field could contain both a Corson and a Sherman, never wholly disappeared. But professionalisation reduced the discipline's variousness in the period after World War I partly as the

result of a profound epistemological break. That break changed how relations between the text, the critic, the student and the teacher were conceived.

As is widely accepted, this break was inaugurated around 1920 by two key figures: T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, both of whom Buurma and Heffernan discuss of course but whose paradigm shift they downplay in the interest of their teaching-focussed account.

Most importantly, Eliot authoritatively removed literature from Arnold's framework: it was no longer available to a generalisable civilising or 'perfecting' mission. He also removed literary criticism from belle-lettrism (i.e., the journalist's review pages) as well as from the scholars (whether philologists or literary historians in their 'scientific' mode à la Hyppolite Taine) as well as, indeed, from more isolated figures like Sherman and Corson. Eliot insisted on literature's *autonomy* but without resorting to 'poetry for poetry's sake' aestheticism à la A. C. Bradley or Walter Pater. For him, instead, the primary purpose of literary criticism was proper judgment of a text's quality (according to criteria he developed) in the primary practical interest of helping poets improve their poetry. This project does not, I think, owe much to Eliot's experiences as an Extension teacher, it owes more to his background in academic philosophy and then to his contact with anti-academic modernists like Ezra Pound and T. E. Hulme.

On this broad basis, Richards, who was, unlike Eliot, an academic, and who came out of both experimental psychology and philosophy, carried out a famous classroom experiment at Cambridge. What, he enquired, did his audience (who were not only students) understand by this object Eliot had helped radically to autonomise—the poem on the (mimeographed) page? And how accurate were their judgments of it? It turned out that proper judgment and understanding eluded his audience: their responses, so Richards argued, were systematically blocked by their ignorance, their ideological preconceptions and their personal associations and feelings. And so a new task opened out for literary educators: to train students to see and assess texts as they existed simply on the page (banishing, for instance, even reading poetry aloud). This was not of itself a democratic task but it set the conditions for English's roaring success across most of the twentieth century.

The new project was developed in very different ways in the US and the British Commonwealth. In the US it was taken up (via William Empson) by the 'new critics'; in the UK and Commonwealth by the Leavisites. Neither monopolised the discipline but both came to be seen as the most organised schools of literary studies of their time. Consensus around that view broke up only around 1970.

The Leavisites were particularly intellectually and institutionally powerful in their zone of influence not just because their project incorporated an explicit and specific understanding of the English department's social and cultural function (which, as it were, reconciled Arnold to Richards and Eliot) but also because they insisted that what really mattered was what went on in the classroom. Leavisism was a teaching method before it was anything else. So it is a pity I think that no Leavisites appear in *The Teaching Archive*: attention to them would have helped extend and nuance Buurma and Heffernan's account of relations between teaching and scholarship.

In the end, this kind of big picture of the discipline's history can be joined to Buurma and Heffernan's findings easily enough. All that is required is to recognise the discipline's eclecticism and institutional range. After all, the new critics and the Leavisites may between them have dominated English departments, but, as Buurma and Heffernan remind us, they never overwhelmed them.

What Buurma and Heffernan's account and interests cannot do however are offer us insight into literary criticism's intellectual richness in the decades of its greatest prestige. After Eliot and Richards (and Empson)'s interventions, English became the mid-20th century's most popular academic discipline, partly because the ideas it put forward (let me repeat, not just by the new critics or Leavisites) were so various, innovative and exciting. In its heyday, English's *intellectual history* was astonishingly inventive and searching on its own terms.

Let's not forget that.

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