Employment of English

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love literature. I really do. And however much it might shock my colleagues, I believe that some books are better than others, too. Yet this belief of mine complicates my love: I like some books and some writers a great deal, whereas there are other books and other writers I don’t care for at all. So now that I think of it, I guess it makes about as much sense to say “I love literature” as to say “I’m fond of food.” It looks as if I’m going to have to start this preface all over again, this time from a coherent premise.

Then again, perhaps the incoherence of the premise should be my premise: how has it come to pass that in the profession of academic literary study, professors of English can publicly profess their love of “literature” (all of it, presumably) as if they were saying something
meaningful? And loving literature as they do, renowned critics renounce
criticism: some complain that academic criticism is too esoteric; some
complain that contemporary academic criticism is too politicized; some
complain that any kind of criticism inevitably positions itself as “super-
ior” to its object, and is suspect on that basis alone. English departments
throw themselves (and the very nation) into turmoil over whether to
introduce a required “theory” course for graduate students—or whether
to jettison the Chaucer-Milton-Shakespeare requirement for undergradu-
ates. Conferences, colloquia, careers are devoted to asking whether liter-
ary criticism can have any productive political role in the world; confer-
ences, colloquia, careers are devoted to asking whether literary criticism
loves literature. Traditional defenses of the humanities no longer compel
assent from students, trustees, or legislators (each for their own reasons
more concerned with return on investment than with Remembrance of
Things Past), and, accordingly, traditional defenses of the humanities are
no longer attempted by junior faculty or graduate students. And year
after year, thousands of new Ph.D.s in the field find that amid the
myriad debates over the practices and prospects of the profession, there
are no teaching jobs for them, regardless of what they think of the
function of criticism at the present time.

What does the future look like for departments of English literature?
Does academic literary study even have a future—or should it?

This book is about the intellectual and economic status of the profession
of literary study at a time when “employment” and “English” are two of
the most volatile and contested terms in the business. Some of the
chapters that follow address the current employment conditions in En-
glish departments, by analyzing the professional tensions created by a
substantially shrunken job market; other chapters address the social
functions of literary study and interpretive theory, in English depart-
ments and in the broader culture. All of them were written in response
to, and are informed by, the profession’s competing (and, in some
respects, mutually defining) fiscal and intellectual imperatives—the in-
tersection of which, I argue, both constitutes and mystifies the crisis of
reproduction in the modern languages. The Employment of English is thus
divided, as its structure suggests, between attention to “employment in English” and the task of “employing English” (or the knowledges produced in English) outside the academy. I do not suggest any easy or predictable connection between these two senses of “employment”: I do not argue that the job market will revive in English if every member of the MLA agrees to preface his or her book with the credo “I love literature, I really do,” nor do I argue that the survival (or demise) of literary study depends on the utility of cultural studies to the professional-managerial class. But I do think literary and cultural studies can serve useful and even politically progressive ends, and I do think their ability to serve those ends is predicated in part on the economic and intellectual health of the profession. If the essays in this book prove moderately convincing, then, I hope that they will call readers to rethink how English—and English teachers—can best be employed.

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