Manifesto of a Tenured Radical

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THE POLITICS
OF ENGLISH
Over the past century a series of cowbird eggs have been laid in the capacious university nest. A cowbird puts its egg in the nest of some other species. Being stronger and more aggressive than the other nestlings, the young cowbirds get more of the worms, grow faster, and may shove the other nestlings out of the nest or cause them to starve.

—David Perkins, “The Future of Keats Studies”

In the literature curriculum, Perkins allows, the nestlings that have been starving and are nearly dead are the canonical works of English literature. In each new cowbird invasion, a body of theory has not only demanded space for itself but also helped plant new and brutally opportunistic textual eggs in the true nest. A series of nonnative species has filled our good English trees. First it was modern philosophy and literature displacing classical studies; then in the 1930s Marxism helped clear the way for American literature. More recently, feminism, multiculturalism, and gay studies have laid their eggs in the nest; now John Keats is starving on the forest floor. The shorthand term for the force that has done all this recent damage is “theory.” Has it actually undermined the discipline, as Perkins believes, or has it kept it adaptable and enabled it to survive?
There is no question that admitting new texts or theories into the discipline has consequences. You admit Saussure or Freud, for example, and before too long you’ve got Derrida and Lacan on your hands. In other words, new admissions bring with them intellectual traditions that continue to develop or, in the nestling metaphor, grow and take up more space. Yet the discipline’s ability to adapt and to absorb new species has also kept it alive when other fields, more resistant to cultural change, have seen themselves diminish in size and influence. But disciplinary opportunism has not always led to admirable introspection or to social responsibility. Theory’s role here has been more mixed.

I want to open Manifesto by asking how theory has helped bring us to where we are in literary studies, and by suggesting that it has done both more and less to fulfill its promise than we might have guessed thirty years ago at the start of the theory revolution. While I cannot share Perkins’s nostalgia for a past that I consider racist, sexist, reactionary, and substantially anti-intellectual, I will grant the claim that provoked his search for avian infiltrators: Keats and the traditional canon may not be headed for extinction but they do occupy a lot less of our attention than they did a few decades ago.

If the brutally selective canon we studied then were merely a function of concern for quality or value, as Perkins believes, then a pervasive sense of loss might be justified. Yet I have no doubt whatsoever that this was not the case. As a literature major from 1963 to 1967—at Antioch College, arguably the most progressive college in the country—I read not a single work by an African American writer in any course and only a few works by women. I can in fact only remember being assigned Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf. A number of us read other things on our own, but that was the extent of our assigned readings by women and minorities. Antioch did have a highly successful Black Students Association at the time, but its members focused on other issues. Even the black students themselves knew so little about the Afro-American literary heritage that they saw no reason to place any pressure on the literature curriculum. As for feminism, the contemporary movement did not begin to have an impact on the curriculum until the mid- to late 1970s.

My anecdotal evidence is supported by research Michael Bérubé reports in his Marginal Forces / Cultural Centers (1992). Except for some presentations on “Negro folk songs” delivered in the 1920s and 1930s, the Modern Language Association’s annual convention offered no papers on African American writing until one delivered in 1953; a decade passed before another such paper was presented. Similarly, by 1950 the annual MLA bibliography listed only two contemporary studies of African American writers, both being books on the poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar (43–44). As late as the 1960s the mainstream anthologies published by Norton gave virtually no space to African American writers. So it
is not surprising that African American writers were not widely taught in white institutions or that they received only narrow attention even in historically black colleges. Indeed, the hostility toward their work voiced by some of the New Critics, such as Cleanth Brooks’s dismissal of Langston Hughes in his 1939 *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, reinforced widespread institutional racism. I will have more to say about race and the curriculum both in this chapter and in chapter 5. For now, suffice it to say that the past some reactionary critics evoke nostalgically is not a past to which many Americans would eagerly return.

Yet the role of theory in provoking canonical expansion has actually been somewhat limited. Certainly there are many more theory courses than there were as recently as the 1970s, and feminist theory has successfully pressed academics to read and teach much more widely in forgotten works by women. Although political and social theory about racism has helped press the academy to begin reforming itself, literary and interpretive theory cannot take much credit for the gradual inclusion of works by minority writers in scholarship and teaching. Indeed we did not really even see theoretically inflected studies of minority writers until the 1980s, and American resistance to sophisticated theoretical reflection about the social construction of race remains very strong in the 1990s; our culture’s instinctive view of race remains essentialist. Furthermore, the rapid growth of the theory industry—which has dominated literary scholarship for over twenty years—that has produced numerous theoretical subfields whose advocates no longer attempt to remain current across the whole spectrum of theory. Thus many American theorists avoid reading the anti-essentialist race theory that would teach them much about themselves and their country. That is not, however, to offer anti-essentialism unqualified praise. Reading Derrida alone will not fill the cultural need I am addressing. Americans might, for example, read the anti-essentialist race theory growing out of the British cultural studies tradition and then ask how it can be rearticulated to the specificities of American history.1

In an intellectual environment where different versions of feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and cultural studies intersect and compete for our commitment, therefore, does the unitary term “theory” have any meaning? As a reactive way of collapsing the whole range of theoretical discourses into a single (and thereby more avoidable) identity, the term may reasonably still be regarded with a degree of exasperation. Yet at the same time, teachers and scholars do continue to describe themselves as being “in theory,” thereby at least situating themselves within a particular historical conjuncture, but it is increasingly difficult thereby to evoke the possibility of identifying themselves with a loose alliance of contemporary intellectual movements. Departments
occasionally advertise for specialists in theory and talk of teaching courses in theory, a conversation in which phenomenology, deconstruction, narratology, postmodernism, and other bodies of theory all seem more or less interchangeable, but in the 1990s the universal category has widely been abandoned for more specific searches and courses. The collapsing of differences that was characteristic of the seventies and to some degree of the eighties clearly blocked the comprehension of theories on their own terms and made theory intellectually imaginable to some only as a generalized other. But at the same time it prevented the policing of theory by those uninterested in its specificity, leaving it altogether up to those involved to decide the content of theory courses. However simplified the global term may be, then, it has a historical existence and a certain practical power in our lives.

Especially in the 1980s several of the multiple discourses or bodies of theory have been strikingly in dialogue with one another and, as a result, have been partly defined by the process of adapting to, incorporating, rejecting, or transforming one another's insights, assumptions, and challenges. Thus there is arguably an implicit discursive field called theory, constantly in flux, that is structured by these affirmations and disputations. No individual discourse can realistically hope either to represent or wholly to occupy that field. Nor are the boundaries of the discursive field universally agreed on. What counts as theoretical and what counts as theoretically important are very much open to dispute. Some discourses may be acknowledged as theoretically inflected and informed without being widely credited as contributing to the continuing articulation of theoretical problematics. Some polemical and politically oppositional texts, on the other hand, though not engaged with the discourses that count as theoretical within the academy, nonetheless are implicitly theoretically grounded and certainly able to contribute to theoretical self-definition and critique. Some writers in the 1980s spoke of high and low theory to differentiate between what they considered more and less rhetorically sophisticated theoretical discourses or even to differentiate between theoretical writing and self-consciously stylized, deliberately chosen social practices, which might include the oppositional music, literature, rhetoric, or dress styles of particular subcultures. Others would consider such a distinction elitist or reactionary.

Are there, however, any characteristics common to all these theories and intellectual processes? At other moments in history, a theory has been taken to imply a finite set of logically related propositions. In the current historical context, with its wide disputation even within individual bodies of theory and its pervasive assumption that no theory can acquire permanent, ahistorical truth content, theory has a rather different status. For us, in the wake of the poststructuralist revolution, what probably most distinguishes theoretical from
nontheoretical discourse is its tendency toward self-conscious and reflective interpretive, methodological, and rhetorical practices. This tendency, of course, is not unqualified. Self-reflection is not a condition that theory can decisively enter into and maintain. It is an intermittent element of various discursive practices, one made possible by particular historical pressures. Indeed, what is recognized and credited as genuine self-reflection will itself change over time, just as the available forms of self-reflection are themselves historically produced and constrained. Nonetheless, theoretical writing now typically assumes that meaning is not automatically given, that it must be consciously produced by a critical writing practice, that methodological, epistemological, and political choices and determinations are continually at issue in critical analysis.

From this perspective it is possible to see that a particular discursive tradition—say, New Criticism—could be genuinely theoretical at one point in its history and not at another. When a body of theory ceases to be in crisis, when it no longer has to struggle to define its enterprise and mark its similarities to and differences from other theories, when it imagines itself potentially coextensive with the discipline it addresses, when its assumptions come to seem not merely preferable but inevitable and automatic, when it is taken to be a given part of the natural world, when it can be entered into and applied almost without conscious decision, then it no longer counts as theory. Of course, entire bodies of theory do not usually change—develop or decay—all at once. Even though particular theorists can produce founding or radically transforming discourses, other individual practitioners may often seem either to lag behind the development of the discourse as a whole or to succeed in applying a theory in a largely uncritical and unreflective way, thereby perhaps anticipating the general process of normalization. Indeed, part of the comedy or, if you will, the charm of literary discourse in the academy is the survival of any number of discredited interpretive practices alongside the most recent developments in the humanities. Yet if this theoretical babel seems to evoke irresponsible disarray, it also allows for provocatively reductive deflations of what might otherwise be unchallenged claims to sophistication. Even apparently reactionary arguments can keep alive interpretive problems that have not, despite confident claims to the contrary, in fact been superseded by new theoretical moves.

After three decades of influential recent high theory in France and nearly that many in Britain and the United States, it is also time to admit that not all theory has been of the same quality and not all its practitioners have done thoughtful or impressive work. The best work, to be sure, has left the humanities and social sciences radically transformed and left many of us with distinctly different views of the world than we had before. We have come to understand the social construction of much, including gender, that we took as naturally
given before. We have recognized the political character of cultural products that we once thought were above historical processes. Our new notions of language and meaning admit the reality of complex connotation in ways earlier generations consistently resisted. Yet the rapid movement of the life of theory has also produced a lemming-like effect, where opportunistic scholars rush after every new development in hopes of making a name for themselves. If the broader movements have not been faddish, some of their advocates have been. We need to admit this despite the tendency to overreact in defending ourselves against those who burlesque the theory revolution, from Walter Jackson Bate to David Perkins.² It is time to ask what theory has and has not done for us, indeed time to ask more of it than we have to date.

In 1970s English departments, questions about the usefulness of theory typically devolved into demonstrations that different theoretical perspectives could be productively adapted to the close reading of literary texts. But as theory placed ever more pressure on the produced, consensual, libidinal, or political nature of signification, texts themselves began to become increasingly indeterminate phenomena. More traditional scholars were often anxious about this, though others took pains to reassure them that the task of interpretation was in no way jeopardized by its potentially infinite character. As Paul de Man was fond of saying in the early days of deconstruction, when some thought such an unstable or conflicted view of meaning would momentarily bring the sky down over their heads, “but it does not block discourse.” In other words, far from inhibiting interpretation—the universal business of the humanities—deconstruction, like other bodies of theory, would actually open more opportunities for interpretation. Thus, in what may seem a curious paradox to those in other disciplines, academics in English have come to accept (in practice if not openly) that the meaning of a literary text is, as it were, wholly up for grabs, while the sacred character of the text itself is indisputable. In this dynamic, I would argue, it has never been the sacredness of the text that has been at issue. The literary text is defended so as to distract attention from the real object to be protected—the profession of literary studies.

There is nothing necessarily illicit about the use of deconstruction (or most other bodies of theory) for various kinds of immanent textual analysis. With the rise of cultural studies, to be sure, as I shall suggest in chapter 4, immanent textual analysis appropriately became suspect. Until then, the key problem with the interpretation of individual texts arose when a depoliticized and radically decontextualized version of immanent analysis became a transcendent moral value, as often happens in English studies. When Derrida, for example, practices close textual analysis, the status of the text as an object of veneration or doubt is always open to question. Moreover, he generally reads individual texts to raise
larger critical and social issues. Following Derrida, we may, then, analyze a literary narrative so as to address the issue of the general social demand that we narrate our subjectivity. However, under the leadership of what was once the Yale school, deconstruction in America restored the text to a venerated position and militantly dropped any consideration of larger social questions. Textual contradictions became merely rhetorical occasions for ecstasy or despair.

In this respect, though, literary deconstruction was merely following the pattern of other bodies of theory in the United States. Most bodies of theory, in fact, have characteristically compromised their claims to self-reflection and social or professional criticism in order to gain a place in the modern academic establishment. In other words, the object of interpretation and the content of interpretive discourse are considered appropriate subjects for discussion and scrutiny, but the interests of the interpreter and the discipline and society he or she serves are not. This restriction has produced a number of contradictory, almost schizophrenic, theoretical practices: until recently, psychoanalytic critics have typically been unable to examine either how their own interpretive activity or the aims and assumptions of their academic disciplines are libidinally determined; Marxist critics have frequently been reluctant or unable to analyze how their own projects are historically positioned and produced; and American deconstructive critics rarely examine the logic of their disciplines with the same rigor that they apply to constitutive contradictions in literary texts.

Lest this observation seem to score a distinctive blow against such contemporary theory, let me state clearly that in this respect most theorists behave like almost everyone else. They do not challenge the territorialization of university intellectual activity or in any way risk undermining the status and core beliefs of their fields. The difference, for theorists, is that this blindness or reluctance often contradicts the intellectual imperatives of the very theories they espouse. Indeed, only a theorized discipline can be an effective site for a general social critique—that is, a discipline actively engaged in self-criticism, a discipline that is a locus for struggle, a discipline that renews and revises its awareness of its history, a discipline that inquires into its differential relations with other academic fields, and a discipline that examines its place in the social formation and is willing to adapt its writing practices to suit different social functions.

To make these claims, to be sure, is to recognize that the conditions blocking this kind of inquiry are beginning to change. Indeed I would not be empowered to see the institutionalized blindness of theory within academic departments if the discipline of literary studies were not already somewhat open to this kind of self-criticism. As a discipline, perhaps we should now call on the example of the 1960s, when we were at least willing to interrupt the transmission of the canon of English literature to talk about the Vietnam War. If the general 1960s
politicization of the university did not produce a real theorizing of academic disciplines, it did place the university’s social responsibilities on the academic agenda. Feminism has done so as well at moments, and Afro-American studies has repeatedly attempted to do so against resistance.

Yet neither feminism nor Afro-American studies is now well positioned to initiate a general critique of academia’s social mission. Both have been partly isolated by being institutionalized within separate programs. But that is not an insurmountable difficulty and indeed being outside traditional disciplines has an advantage for critique. The more serious problems include some that are internal. In two versions, cultural feminism and Afro-centrism, these movements have fallen under the spell of American exceptionalism and mounted fantasmatic claims to unique redemptive powers. This has made them intolerant of differences of opinion within their own ranks and thus ill suited for dialogue with other versions of feminism and Afro-American studies, let alone other bodies of theory. For these and other reasons, some of which I will note shortly, both bodies of theory have failed to realize their potential for a thoroughgoing analysis of academia’s place in society.

Of course there have been at least isolated instances of serious and theoretically grounded disciplinary critique for some time, beginning with Richard Ohmann’s *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (1976), but the more general phenomenon is more recent. Here one would begin by citing the publications of GRIP (the Group for Research on the Institutionalization and Professionalization of Literary Study) in this country and such British works as Chris Baldick’s *The Social Mission of English Criticism* (1983); Terry Eagleton’s *The Function of Criticism* (1984); and Janet Batsleer, Tony Davies, Rebecca O’Rourke, and Chris Weedon’s *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class* (1985). More recently, Evan Watkins, Gerald Graff, Terry Caesar, James Sosnoski, John Guillory, and others have begun to rethink the discipline’s history and practices. This shift in emphasis, moreover, has real, not merely imagined, risks for the existing infrastructure of universities, even for their economy. As we shall see more specifically in the last four essays in *Manifesto*, when theory casts its gaze on departments and universities as we know them, they can be shown partly to inhibit intellectual work and even to function as reactionary forces within the larger society.

It is apparent that both disciplinary critique and a larger critique of academia—enterprises that I believe to be the inescapable destiny of the logic of theory, though not necessarily the inevitable direction of its social practice—will produce both stress within departments and a certain backlash against theory. That seems to be one underlying cause for statements like Stanley Fish’s “theory’s day is dying,” a statement that may reflect Fish’s continuing resis-
tance—from the 1980s through his 1995 *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*—to the more politically and socially self-critical turn to recent theory and to the new willingness to view the profession of literary studies with some distance. For Fish’s earlier work had largely emptied the text of any intrinsic meaning and instead sacralized the profession of literary studies as the guarantor of consensus and the source of a humanistic tradition. As the attention of theory began at least marginally to shift from how to interpret literature to how the discipline of literary studies is constituted and what its social effects are, the discipline came under a distinctly different and more threatening kind of intellectual pressure.

But literary studies for decades had used twin strategies for containing threats to its core politics of interpretation. The first was to harness theory primarily to immanent textual analysis. The second was to turn any body of theory with broad and unsettling disciplinary implications into a subspecialization cut off from any general dialogue with the discipline. A series of potentially revolutionary theories had been tamed in this way, and the analysis of disciplinarity itself would prove no different. Soon it became a field, an isolated area of research, a specialization with, paradoxically, no pressing claims on the discipline’s general attention. Gerald Graff warns against the intellectual containment built into mutually exclusive subspecializations. For all practical purposes his own warning, however, has itself been contained, classified within the subspecialization of disciplinary history.

Similar fates had befallen most of the radical skepticisms with potential to throw the discipline into serious self-scrutiny. The first modern body of theory to be contained in this way was psychoanalysis, which in the 1950s traded disciplinary accommodation for any potential to challenge the false and unreflective rationality that still pervaded professionalized interpretation. In effect, psychoanalytic critics agreed to act like experts in a specialized method with no psychodynamic claims about how literary interpreters practiced their craft. They gave up at once their theory’s inherent potential for self-analysis and for general disciplinary analysis and critique. Many also found ways to accommodate notions of unconscious motivation with sacralized models of the literary text.

Beginning in the previous decade and mounting with furor in the 1950s, the other existing body of theory with similarly disruptive structural potential—Marxism—was scandalized and largely cast out of the American university. But it would eventually establish among its warring traditions its own ways to revere literariness and thus accommodate much of its interpretive practice to disciplinary norms. Its larger politics, however, would remain a threat, so Marxism would be ruthlessly marginalized until the 1970s. As for its capacity for self-reflection and self-critique, Marxism would have to abandon its fantas-
matic claims to scientificity before serious self-scrutiny could become widespread.

In the 1970s, however, another body of theory arrived with greater purchase on the American academy. I refer of course to contemporary feminism, which spread from the public sphere to academia in the mid- to late 1970s and became massively influential in the 1980s. Out of necessity, feminism kept literary studies and the institutions of academia at a distance in its first years. Its early focus on exposing the patriarchal bias in canonical writers prevented it from sacralizing literary texts. Meanwhile, discrimination against women meant that feminists had to fight to find academic employment; that maintained disciplinary critique as a high priority. But by the mid-1980s those patterns had begun to change. Feminists had begun the long and immensely fruitful rediscovery and reinterpretation of forgotten texts by women; that has been tremendously beneficial to the discipline and the culture, but an unexpected side effect has been to install in feminism its own version of literary reverence. Simultaneously, the number of women gaining academic employment began to reach a critical mass in many departments. Though not wholly co-opted, feminism by the early 1990s was securely institutionalized in many places, from departments to publishers’ lists. It was no longer a place to look for foundational critiques of academic institutions that would extend beyond gender to the whole range of their constitutive discourses and practices.

Meanwhile, through all these changes, traditional scholars had a place to retreat to, a conceptual and methodological ground they could call their own in the face of theory’s multiple onslaughts. That place was history, literary history to be specific, and it was more or less what everyone else claimed to be doing while theories multiplied and gained adherents. By the late 1980s, however, this last redoubt began to crumble. History, long little more than an unreflective site on which to stage period-based literary idealization, began to be theorized. Unproblematic and generous in its rewards for decades, history began to be a site for theoretical reflection. Those who resisted the theory revolution now had no presentable territory to call their own, so they retreated into exceptionalist platitudes about the transcendence of art.

The increasing theorizing of history was an overdetermined change. The reverberations of the expanded canon—pressed by feminists, Afro-Americanists, and scholars on the Left—had a cumulative effect on our confidence in a belief that cultural memory could be disinterested and comprehensive. Textuality, a nervous site of uncontainable meanings, began to encompass all sorts of purportedly nonliterary historical documents. Fresh enterprises like the New Historicism, initially centered in Renaissance studies, came to have wider influence. And the field of theory of history, contained by its own larger discipline in
much the same way as literary studies contained its threatening subspecializations, slowly attracted readers in other departments. Meanwhile, fields like anthropology and sociology were undergoing their own crises of confidence. For all these reasons literary historiography could no longer protect itself from the ravages of theory.

By the late 1980s, therefore, a new development in English studies had coalesced enough to have a name—the return to history. Volatile and changeable for two decades, the discipline—or at least a portion of it—was making yet another foray into a new identity and set of commitments. This time, however, the change was heralded by many as a return to an earlier preoccupation. And so the name stuck, at least for a time. I remember some of my older colleagues remarking with satisfaction (and wary camaraderie) my own return to history. No doubt similar conversations and moments of unexpected recognition across a generational divide took place elsewhere in the country.

By the mid-1990s, however, history’s handshake could not so easily be extended across the abandoned battlefields of the profession. In its new incarnation, the older generation began to realize, history as they knew it was pretty much spoiled. For years, history, not patriotism, had been the last refuge of the discipline’s antitheoretical scoundrels. It was what they did, what they stood for, the rich, material ground they invoked against the lemming-like rush from theorist to theorist that seemed to mark the enthusiasms of the young.

There were counterclaims for history from theorists in those days, but they remained atypical. “Always historicize,” cried Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* in one of the 1980s’ most famous opening salvos. Oddly enough, to the extent he believed in Marxism’s predictive powers, he partly meant to invoke principles that a Catholic bishop might have welcomed—focus on mankind’s ultimate destiny in interpreting a mutable world; ask where all of us are (and should be) heading; what telos is hidden in the trials of local time? Of course Jameson and the prelate would have different stories to tell about history’s trends and ultimate meaning, but both would prove equally principled and confident in their application. What Jameson did *not* mean by asking us always to historicize was to seek a contextualization so radical and relative that no universal generalizations about human history could be made.

A decade later it was clear the return to history had gone back to the past without any guarantees about its meaning. Now history was as slippery as textuality, and that was not what traditional literary historians had in mind. “History” indeed seemed yet one more phase in the shape-changing story of contemporary theory. Of course it was more than that for many; its materiality was elaborately recovered and treasured by many involved in the return to history. But that was not enough to relieve the burden of a history without guarantees.
One final turn of the wheel of theory delivered the possibility of an end to literary studies as we knew it—the belated arrival of cultural studies on the American scene. For cultural studies threatened to import into the English curriculum a whole range of objects not only outside literariness but also outside any plausible account of the aesthetic. The underlying basis of literary studies' high cultural prestige might be lost. Moreover, that was not the only threat. The whole notion of a discipline with consensual boundaries was in doubt. Unrepresentable in their entirety in any single department, the range of new objects attracting interpretive interest in cultural studies might simply overwhelm the study of literary texts.

One interesting result of these two developments—the arrival of a self-consciously theorized historiography and the rise of cultural studies in America—was the appearance of reactionary professional organizations devoted to traditional idealization. The Modern Language Association found itself under attack for the only good thing it had done in thirty years—opening its closed shop to a whole range of new interests and constituencies. Rather than throw out the old and bring in the new, the MLA simply multiplied the sessions at its annual conference and gave everyone programs matching their commitments. But that was not enough to keep the literary Right in the fold. Simply having Spenser and Amiri Baraka sessions in adjoining rooms made them furious. They began to resign and form their own organizations where uncomfortable questions would not be asked.

One of the ironies of literary studies in the 1990s is that this conservative fraction of the profession saw no alternative but to revive the aesthetic faith of still earlier generations. That put this group of literary scholars—often liberals according to their self-image—in an implicit alliance with the political Right in the culture wars. English professors and conservative journalists alike could then stand in front of the symbolic schoolhouse to defend the eternal verities of the humanities. One-time English professor liberals were now for all practical purposes in league with William Bennett. Not that these people had any fondness for one another, but a political realignment had taken place in the humanities, and it would begin to have consequences when the university faced challenging questions about its mission and its employment practices.

Now the key question—still unanswered today—could be posed succinctly: would literary studies, and the humanities in general, become more fully reflective, self-critical enterprises? Would they learn to examine their practices and social effects with more than opportunistic self-interest? Meanwhile the potential social costs of an unreflective discipline—housed in unreflective institutions of higher education—began to mount. Theory had successfully opened the problematics of literary meaning, but it had not put the discipline or the
institutions of higher education under comparable scrutiny. As a result, as will be clear in the final essays in the book, neither the disciplines nor the institutions were prepared for the new economic pressures higher education faced in the 1990s and beyond.

To begin to theorize the discipline of English studies, I must emphasize, does not mean that the notion of literariness as a separate cultural domain would simply disappear. The notion of literariness has a history that needs to be studied. But it also needs to be studied in relation to other cultural domains and in closer relation to social and political history, things that English departments are presently disinclined and often ill equipped to do. And the social function of English as a discipline needs to be theorized and deeply rethought.

As I suggested above, the black studies movement of the 1960s had the potential to force a radical reexamination of literary history, the hierarchizing opposition between high culture and popular culture, the ideological construction of the notion of literariness, and the social effects of the English curriculum. But the black studies protests did not produce an influential general critique of the field, in part because a whole range of social and institutional forces helped to protect most literature departments from any serious self-criticism. Black studies programs argued for a separate role because freestanding programs gave them their only guarantee of self-determination and because they wanted, in effect, to emphasize black consciousness-raising. At the same time, traditional disciplines were happy to locate the problem of race elsewhere. As a result, nonblack students avoided courses in black culture and literary studies remained largely unchanged. It is now possible to argue that the choice between separation from and integration into the regular discipline and curriculum is a false one. We need both opportunities for concentrated study of coherent individual traditions and pervasive mainstreaming of those traditions into general pedagogy and scholarship.

But the time has come—especially as some elements of the far Right become entrenched in American society through the end of the century, the increasingly conservative federal judiciary being a prime example—to begin to think and theorize about the social meaning of a specialization in literary studies and to extend that reflection to education more generally. Indeed, this kind of reference to contemporary American society, which some may feel is irrelevant to literary history, is itself therefore necessarily informed by theory. For I do not believe that one writes or teaches or interprets or theorizes in relation only to the eternal verities of the imagination, as literature departments have chosen to believe. We work in our own time; the students we train will live in this historical moment.

Questions like this led me, in the mid-1980s, to begin reviewing anthologies of American literature and course offerings in English departments to see how
well writings by women and minorities were represented. By then women’s poetry and fiction were being given broader representation in some anthologies, but African American writing was present with but a few token texts. We could ask, as I did, what kind of message the English curriculum of the previous decades sent to students? When a curriculum requires a course in Shakespeare, as virtually every English department did, but not a course in Afro-American literature, as virtually no departments did, what message does it give students about black people, what message about the cultural traditions that are valuable and those that are expendable? Are the students we graduate from such programs as likely to see racial justice in their own country as important? The confidence that such values will be dependably if obliquely encouraged by the eternal truths of the literature we do require is an evasive fiction. The point is that the way we construct and communicate any academic discipline, including the study of literature, has interpretable social meaning and possible real social consequences; to pretend otherwise is merely to lie to ourselves.

There is no disputing that the United States is a substantially racist society. In this historical context, therefore, it is potentially a powerful and dangerous seduction to offer students literariness as something they can identify with, as a subject position they can occupy, while constructing it as an ideology that transcends such passing material trivialities as racial justice. In a fundamentally racist society, choosing to marginalize or ignore the study of minority literature, as English departments did throughout their history until the 1990s, articulates literary study to racism.

To entice students into making a significant commitment to the study of literature, we often display its place in our own lives, telling them, in effect, that literature is one of the finer things on earth, that it exhibits at once a powerful realism about the human condition and a visionary synthesis of its highest ambitions. But what does it mean to attach this whole program for transcendence to the experience of only one race, one sex, a restricted set of class fractions within a few national cultures? What does it mean that the experiences of most of the world’s peoples are obliterated in the “humanism” of the English curriculum? As the authors of *Rewriting English* put it: “Beneath the disinterested procedures of literary judgment and discrimination can be discerned the outlines of other, harsher words: exclusion, subordination, dispossession” (Batsleer et al., 30). These are not issues of coverage—this term, which apparently encapsulates the whole thoughtfulness of our model of the English major, suggests a comparison between the depth of our disciplinary model and the claims of a brand of paint—but rather issues of the social effects of disciplinary specialization.

By the mid-1990s anthologies had changed radically, with wide representation of women and minority writers. Here and there around the country a few
Instructors refuse to teach these texts. But it is now very difficult for an undergraduate to take survey courses in literature and not encounter a far more diverse canon than we have taught throughout our history. Yet the depth of thoughtfulness attending this new pedagogy remains doubtful. Faculty members are certainly persuaded that our meaningful literary history was far more diverse than we believed for decades, but narrow issues of coverage and representation still dominate discussions of the curriculum. As I will argue in the next chapter, the work of conceptualizing and teaching anthologies involves wider political and social issues and responsibilities than many in the discipline are comfortable in acknowledging.

Just as students now encounter works by women and minorities regularly, many of them also take courses in interpretive theory. But neither the students nor the faculty who teach them feel much inclined to challenge the social meaning of the discipline as a result. We need, for example, to recognize that literary idealization is necessarily in dialogue with, and embedded in, all the other idealizations by which our culture sustains and justifies itself. Studying literature in a self-reflexive and culturally aware fashion entails asking how the available forms of idealization feed into and relate to one another. These forms are the idealized subject positions offered to us (and from which, to some degree, we choose) — from the subject position of one who loves literature to the subject position of one who loves his or her country, from the idealization of poetry to the idealization of national power.

Many devotees of literature would assume they have no necessary common ground with devotees of the nation state, but the record suggests otherwise. First, the worldwide curricular and scholarly privileging of national literatures — so deeply embedded in our assumptions that it seems a fact of nature — not only disguises other ways of conceptualizing the field but also links literary studies to every exceptionalist narrative of national destiny, grants institutional literary study part of its social rationale, and underwrites the economic basis of the profession. As recent materialist scholarship has shown, the teaching of Shakespeare helps socialize people into their national identity.

However marginalized literary study may be in the United States, therefore, it is nonetheless implicated in an overdetermined field of privileged social roles and admired cultural domains. Indeed, there are differential relations of mutual dependency between the various idealizations that structure and facilitate the ideologies of our moment. Negotiations between and among those differential relations make possible not only our academic specializations but also our governmental policies. We need to draw a map of the relations between literature and our other valorized and devalued domains and discourses. We need to inquire how and why certain concepts — like "literature" or "freedom" — have
their inner contradictions precipitated out and become elevated to a transcen-
dent status within the social formation. For it is not the same to teach English
when our economy is impoverishing millions of our citizens. It is not irrelevant
to the study of literature that members of Congress are trying to reverse the civil
rights gains of the last thirty years. The connotative effects of the ideals of the
whole history of literature become quite different in such changing social
contexts. And the social function and impact of the classroom become quite
different as well.

A liberal reading of the curriculum presupposes that a universal decency,
fairness, and empathy are somehow encouraged by the values promoted within
a limited textual corpus. To press such matters further is to ask, with what
some may feel is an unseemly focus on current events rather than on the
transcendent values of the discipline, what an English professor’s role might be
in educating students to participate in a democracy. But the question of whether
the privileged forms of idealization in the West—privileged again in the disci-
pline of English studies—will necessarily produce either a national or an inter-
national sense of multiracial community has already been answered negatively.
The historically empowered configuration of the discourses of Western human-
ism has repeatedly failed. To see it as our job merely to praise that tradition in
its present form is to be certain to perpetuate that failure. This is not to say that
there are no resources in the tradition. I use those resources throughout this
book; its discourses about the rights of workers underwrites Manifesto’s whole
last section. It is rather to say that the tradition needs to be rethought, critically
theorized, significantly restructured, and realigned in relation to other discourses.

What I am calling for, therefore, is not merely a culturally expanded disci-
pline, something we have substantially achieved in the last decade, but a theoret-
ically self-critical and reflective one, something we still lack. If I am against
English as it was, then, I am far from an unqualified fan of English as it is, and
I have little confidence in what English will be five or ten years from now.
Having recovered from an unbroken history of sexism and become barely aware
of our long night of racism, we are rapidly descending into a gulag labor
program. On the other hand, the theory revolution of the last three decades has
given us the intellectual resources we need to reform ourselves, to theorize our
disciplinary practices and our relations to the larger culture. It has given us the
terms, categories, vantage points, and modes of analysis we need to see ourselves
more clearly. That is the larger promise of the unitary term “theory,” and it is a
promise, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows, that we ignore at our certain
peril.