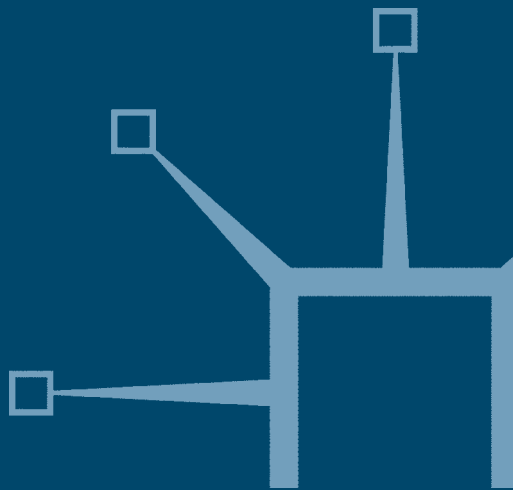


Defining Literary Criticism

Scholarship, Authority and the Possession
of Literary Knowledge, 1880–2002

Carol Atherton



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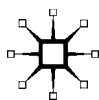
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Carol Atherton

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2005 978-1-349-52393-1

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First published 2005 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-1-349-52393-1 ISBN 978-0-230-50107-2 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230501072

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Atherton, Carol, 1972—

Defining literary criticism : scholarship, authority, and the possession of literary knowledge, 1880–2002 / Carol Atherton.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

1. English literature—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 2. English literature—Study and teaching (Higher)—Great Britain. 3. Criticism—Great Britain—History—20th century. 4. Criticism—Great Britain—History—19th century. I. Title.

PR27.A86 2005

920—dc22

2005045415

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05

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Acknowledgements

A number of individuals and organisations helped me to find and consult the archival materials on which parts of this book are based. Extracts from this material have been reproduced by courtesy of the Keeper of the Archives, University of Oxford; the Syndics of Cambridge University Library; the Archives at King's College, London; Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Nottingham; and the Director and University Librarian, the John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester. Sue Usher, librarian at the English Faculty Library, University of Oxford, helped me in my initial search for material. Merton College, Oxford, awarded me a Schoolteacher Fellowship in August 2000, which enabled me to carry out research at the Bodleian Library. Owen Hartley of the University of Leeds helped me to locate both E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Muse Unchained* and F. R. Leavis's *Education and the University: A Sketch for an 'English School'*.

Part of my research for Chapter 2 was presented as a paper on 'Institutionalising English: The Study of Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century' at 'The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain', the Conference of the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, at the University of Cambridge in May 2002. A revised version of this paper will be published in *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain*, a forthcoming British Academy Centenary Monograph. Chapter 6 is based, in part, on my paper 'The Literary: Theory, Education, and Academic Knowledge', delivered at the 'Post-Theory: Politics, Economics and Culture' conference at De Montfort University in September 2001, and on my article 'The New English A-Level: Contexts, Criticism and the Nature of Literary Knowledge', published in *The Use of English* in Spring 2003. The ideas expressed in this chapter were also explored in 'Firm Foundations? The Condition of English at A-Level', delivered at the English Subject Centre's conference 'The Condition of the Subject' at the University of London in July 2003, and in my article 'Critical Literature? Context and Criticism in A-Level English Literature', published in *English Drama Media* in January 2004.

This book has benefited from the advice, encouragement and kindness of Josephine Guy, Philip Smallwood, Ron Carter and Robert Eaglestone. Brian Sudlow, Sean McEvoy and Martin Fisher read and commented on drafts of various chapters and helped me to sharpen my thinking on

a variety of points: I am also extremely grateful for the friendship and support of Richard Cave, Jess Day, Dermot Fitzsimons, Jan Flanagan, Linda Hill, Simon Mozley, Janet Nevin and Georgia Redpath. Finally, I owe an enormous debt to Matthew Hartley for his continuing patience over what must have seemed a very long period of time.

Introduction

In October 2002, 80 teachers from the west of England were invited to attend a conference on the teaching of English and history, held at Dartington Hall in Devon. Organised by the Prince of Wales, the conference included speeches by the poet Andrew Motion, the historian Simon Schama and 14 other writers and academics. The weekend was intended by the Prince to provide an opportunity for ‘all of you teachers of English and history who do value our culture [...] to enrich your teaching despite the unavoidably narrow straitjacket of the examination system’, particularly at a time of mounting uncertainty about the growth of an ‘exam culture’ in British schools: according to the Prince, such a culture could lead to the creation of ‘an entire generation of culturally disinherited young people’.¹

The Prince of Wales’s concern for education, and for English in particular, was nothing new. In 1989, he stated that English was taught ‘bloody badly’, adding his voice to what Deborah Cameron has described as a period of ‘moral panic’ over the teaching of grammar and Standard English.² Cultural disinheritance and the narrowness of education were also the theme of his 1991 Shakespeare Birthday Lecture, in which he lamented the fact that ‘thousands of intelligent children leaving school at 16 have never seen a play of Shakespeare on film or on the stage, and have never been asked to read a single word of any one of his plays’.³ Such concerns reflect the manner in which the teaching of literature can be said to have generated a ‘moral panic’ of its own, distinct from Cameron’s purely linguistic version yet drawing on a similar fear of cultural dislocation and disorder. Yet the Dartington weekend can also be linked to a much broader set of debates about the academic discipline of English, involving not only the issue of literary heritage, but also the very nature of literary knowledge.

2 *Defining Literary Criticism*

In 2000, post-16 education in England and Wales underwent a series of reforms that included the introduction of an additional set of public examinations and an increase in the number of subjects studied in preparation for university entrance.⁴ These reforms also represented a revision of the discourses that governed certain subjects, marking a philosophical change in what was to be considered 'valid' academic knowledge and how this knowledge was to be quantified and assessed. It was perhaps inevitable that English Literature – one of the education system's most complex and problematic subjects – should fall into this category. In fact Peter Buckroyd, chief examiner in English Literature at the Northern Examinations and Assessment Board, went so far as to comment that students would fail the new exams if schools continued to teach English literature in 'conventional' ways.⁵ The new English was to be dynamic, rigorous and theoretically informed: students would need to show an understanding of cultural and historical contexts, literary traditions and movements, and 'the ways in which texts have been interpreted and valued by different readers at different times'.⁶

The reform of A-level English Literature has provoked a number of debates – about the defining qualities of literature, its place in forming the individual sensibility and the elitism involved in making its study more complex and specialised – that highlight the contested nature of English in the early twenty-first century. In schools, philosophies of English range from the heritage-driven literary canon of the National Curriculum to the 'critical literacy' promoted by organisations such as the National Association for the Teaching of English, drawing on new technologies and the popular media to create a version of the subject that reflects pupils' own experiences of texts and language. In universities, English exists in a number of diverse and often competing forms, with the popularity of some of these forms – cultural studies, postcolonial literature, feminist theory – threatening the existence of other, more traditional specialisms in less fashionable centuries and genres.⁷ Furthermore, as if a lack of internal consensus were not enough, English and its practices are frequently attacked by sceptics outside the discipline's boundaries. Many of these attacks focus on literary criticism, the process of analysis and evaluation that seems to epitomise the subject's intangibility. This process – or so one popular strand of thought goes – is all about making texts mean whatever one wants them to mean, seeing in them things that are not actually 'there': what it emphasises is not knowledge, but interpretation. This seems to prove almost incontrovertibly that the discipline of English lacks an objective body of knowledge, a core of material that can be taught and tested. And if

English is subjective, based only on opinions, there seems to be little to separate the reading produced by a seventeen-year-old student from that of a schoolteacher or university professor, or indeed the person who has never studied English literature in any formal sense. In the words of Martin Amis, the study of literature has always possessed a 'historical vulnerability', in that 'it has never seemed difficult enough [...] Interacting with literature is easy. Anyone can join in.'⁸ The effect of such beliefs is to deny the discipline's claim to expert knowledge – hinting that its very status as a discipline is built on false assumptions.

The new version of A-level English Literature that was introduced in September 2000 initially seemed to counter some of this vulnerability. One of the ways in which it tried to achieve this was by demanding a close analysis of the contexts in which texts are produced and interpreted, meaning that the study of historical and cultural backgrounds, and of literary criticism, would become more explicit and systematic. It was perhaps not surprising that many of the objections to these reforms focused on their perceived threat to the 'specialness' of literature, with historical and critical scholarship being seen as intrusive and unnecessary. While the new focus on contexts and interpretations gave English a factual dimension that would help to regulate the assessment of knowledge, this also seemed to detract from more idealistic subject philosophies that emphasised personal growth and spiritual development. The acquisition of factual knowledge therefore came into direct conflict with the more complex and less tangible matter of the individual's relationship with the text.

What is most interesting about these debates is their echoing of arguments that were circulating over a hundred years ago, when English literature first became an academic subject in English universities.⁹ Objections to English, then as now, focused on its perceived lack of academic weight and the belief that it was bound up with judgements rather than knowledge, making it difficult to assess for academic purposes. English struggled to gain acceptance at Oxford and Cambridge, and was excluded from the remit of the British Academy when it was founded in 1901, with Henry Butler, one of the Academy's early Presidents, stating that it represented a 'genius' which 'cannot be organized'.¹⁰ Its supporters therefore had to demonstrate that it was possible to formulate an appropriate academic methodology for English – to set down what the study of English literature was to involve, the kinds of knowledge it was to produce and why these were to be considered valuable, within a wider social context as well as in academic terms.

This desire to codify the study of literature for academic purposes was part of a set of changes in intellectual life that took place during the

nineteenth century, usually seen in terms of the related processes of professionalisation and specialisation and the changes that they brought about in the nature of intellectual authority. In the early Victorian period, such authority was invested in the 'man of letters' or 'sage', a figure who made a living by writing and possessed a general and wide-ranging awareness of issues from history, politics and religion to literature, philosophy and natural science. The man of letters published widely (and for a broad and generalist audience) and was recognised as a popular source of authority, with this authority often assuming a moral as well as an intellectual dimension. However, such men were replaced, over the course of the century, by professional academics. This new class of intellectual workers wrote for specialist audiences – in other words, their professional peer-group – and were governed by professional codes, structures and methodologies. This situation was made possible by changing perceptions of knowledge itself, including how this knowledge was to be accumulated, organised and used, and what purpose it was to serve. It was also hastened by the increasing fragmentation of the reading public that had been brought about by the spread of literacy and developments in print technology, meaning that reading – in particular, of new fictional genres such as the romance and the detective story – was brought into the domain of the mass market and its very different needs and demands.¹¹ Late-Victorian intellectuals could not rely on the existence of a socially homogenous public sphere of readers who shared both their cultural values and the type of knowledge on which their work was based. Instead, they turned to the universities to provide them with a new kind of intellectual community.

As intellectual life became a profession, the knowledge it involved had to be regulated and defined according to professional codes, governing matters such as progression, validity and social utility. For some disciplines of knowledge, assimilation into professional structures was relatively straightforward. The natural sciences, for instance, readily adopted norms of specialisation, precision and the avoidance of bias, and the use of 'scientific' methodologies subsequently assisted the professionalisation of disciplines such as history. This process was aided by the establishment of university departments and courses at both Honours and postgraduate level, and by the existence of institutions such as the British Academy and the Royal Society, which conferred additional status on their members, supported research and provided a forum for professional discussion.

It seems to have been much more difficult, however, to make the study of English literature fit these new professional paradigms. For one thing, there was strenuous resistance to the idea that the subject could be an

academic discipline. Its detractors argued that it lacked rigour and was too subjective and 'gossipy', requiring no specialised skill beyond that of mere reading – which, as one Dr Mayo at the University of Cambridge argued, was a skill that should be gained in the nursery, not the university.¹² Even those who were convinced of the benefits of reading were sceptical, believing that literature possessed qualities that could not be reduced to the level of a science. While literary study had gained enormous popularity in the adult education movement, and was seen within that sector as something of a 'poor man's Classics' because of its perceived capacity to civilise and humanise, its entry into the universities was to be more complex.

The present volume – a contribution to the growing field of the 'history of the book' – is an attempt to trace some of the arguments that have surrounded the study of English since it became a professionalised academic discipline in English universities in the late nineteenth century. Central to this attempt is an account of the form that English took in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in a range of English universities: Oxford, Cambridge, Manchester, Nottingham and King's College, London. Such an account builds on the work carried out by D. J. Palmer in *The Rise of English Studies* (1965), which offers a chronological history of the institutionalisation of English and the debates over the subject that took place at Oxford in the 1880s. It also reaffirms the value of a documentary approach to intellectual history after a period in which studies of the discipline of English have often been highly politicised, focusing on the rhetoric that surrounded the subject rather than the institutional forms it eventually took. The desire to 'rewrite' the study of English that emerged from the Marxist revisionism of the early 1980s drew much of its impetus from the claims made on behalf of the subject's capacity to humanise and civilise, found abundantly (although not exclusively) in the work of critics such as Matthew Arnold and John Churton Collins. Yet while such claims were powerful, they did not offer a form of English that could be shaped to fit the developing norms of academic professionalisation. The early professors of English needed to address these norms in order to construct an academic methodology that was appropriate to the study of English literature, countering the claims that literature was an unsuitable topic for academic study. In order to gain credibility as a discipline, English had to be rigorous and systematic: what it had to demonstrate was not the civilising power of literary study, but its intellectual validity.

What emerges from this documentary history is a strong sense of what Marjorie Garber has termed 'disciplinary libido', or the desire of one

academic discipline to become its near neighbour.¹³ English secured its disciplinary status not because it was unique – in the way that its nineteenth-century proselytisers wanted it to be – but because its early institutional forms drew on the same kinds of factually based knowledge as other, more established subjects such as history, Classics and philology. Students on these early courses were examined on sources and contexts, metre and verse-forms, and the development of genres: they were asked to paraphrase and quote at length, and put lists of texts in chronological order. Much of their set reading consisted of poetry, rather than prose fiction. Most of this poetry was pre-Romantic: at Oxford, this historical bias was even more apparent, with over half of the university's English degree being given over to the study of medieval and Anglo-Saxon literature. Yet literary *criticism* was largely absent. The evaluative process that would seem to lie at the heart of criticism, with all its connotations of subjectivity and personal opinion, was difficult to reconcile with the demands of professionalisation. Instead, the early courses in English literature focused on kinds of knowledge that were easy to teach and assess, and were therefore comparable with the form and content of other professionalised disciplines.

Yet while such methods enabled English to take up its place in the universities, they did not pass unchallenged. One feature of the wider development of literary criticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is the way in which some writers resisted the practices and values of academic study even as these practices were being established: either explicitly, in denying that literary criticism could be 'taught' in a scientific, codified way; or implicitly, in a refusal to adopt the methods that were coming to be accepted elsewhere as part of an academic discipline. The advent of academic professionalisation may have limited the days of the amateur scientist or historian, but literary criticism continued to be produced outside the universities, often in direct opposition to the emerging norms of scholarship. Moreover, these norms were questioned not just by outsiders, but by the very people who might be expected to be most vociferous in upholding them: the early professors and academics, who frequently occupied an ambivalent space between the values of the amateur and the institutional status of the professional.

The resulting debates about the nature of criticism form an important part of the disciplinary history of English. In essence, these debates are about a problem of definition: the issue of what literary criticism was, who it was written for and what kind of skills it drew upon. Should literary criticism ever devote itself solely to an audience of specialists, or

was it to retain its older function of explaining texts to a wider group of less knowledgeable readers? Could it ever rely on the kind of knowledge that could be taught and examined, or did it depend instead on the personal sensibility of the individual critic? In short, did one have to study English at a university in order to be an effective literary critic – however ‘effectiveness’, in this context, was defined?

The main body of this book covers a period from the 1880s – when debates about the status of English at Oxford, fuelled by the work of the critic John Churton Collins, were at their height – to 1969, when F. R. Leavis, in *English Literature in Our Time and the University*, stated the need for criticism to keep alive ‘the long creative continuity of our culture’.¹⁴ Yet this is not where the book ends. My own work as a teacher of English Literature at secondary level has shown me that the most significant feature of these early debates about literary criticism – about its nature and methods, its underlying values and its social utility – is their persistence. Modern commentators on the discipline of English Literature in schools are discussing exactly the same issues as their nineteenth-century counterparts: whether the study of literature is ‘academic’ enough to compete with disciplines such as history and the sciences; how this study can be made more objective and ‘examinable’; and whether attempts to make it more objective risk jeopardising the pleasure to be gained from reading. These debates hint at the existence not just of the ‘disciplinary libido’ mentioned by Marjorie Garber, but also of a kind of ‘disciplinary anxiety’: an uncertainty about the kind of knowledge to which literary criticism should lay claim, the usefulness of such knowledge, and the relationship between academic literary criticism and the wider practice of reading in society. Such an anxiety has been particularly apparent in the debates that have surrounded the reform of English Literature at A-level: whether they recognise it or not, teachers involved in these debates are actually revisiting a very old set of arguments. It also extends to the future of literary scholarship itself. When academics such as Harold Bloom and John Carey try – in texts aimed at a general audience – to deny the value of academic specialisation, and when forums such as reading groups and the Internet encourage readers to act as their own critics, the need for the specialist literary knowledge produced in university departments of English seems to be undermined.¹⁵ While academics in other fields have managed to capture the imagination of a general readership, literary criticism seems to have had no such success. The professionalisation of English studies and the development of literary criticism are marked instead by a

continuing tension surrounding the relationship between amateur and professional, between academic practice and the needs and values of the wider public, which centres, ultimately, on the question of whether academic literary criticism is actually needed – and, if not, whether it should continue to survive in its current institutional form.

Part I

Institutions

1

Histories of English: The Critical Background

The attempt to write a disciplinary history of English literature is nothing new. Since the early 1980s, the rapid growth of academic literary theory has given many critics the impetus to 'rewrite' English as a subject, claiming to expose the social and political assumptions on which the study of literature is based. Chris Baldick has described such rewritings as central to the deconstruction of the 'lazy' ideologies on which attitudes to English are often based, 'in particular the assumption that the existing institutions and values of society are natural and eternal rather than artificial and temporary'.¹ However, while there is general agreement on the importance of unpicking the subject's complex past, it is clear that this process has itself met with problems, not the least of which is the difficulty of writing a neutral history.

This is particularly the case with the Marxist accounts that have dominated attempts to explicate the rise of English. The majority of these accounts follow the same essential paradigm. Typically, the study of English literature is depicted as an ideologically motivated attempt at bringing about social cohesion, offering an alternative means of security after the decline of religion commonly identified with the mid-nineteenth century, and a way of addressing the 'crises' brought about by Chartism in the 1840s and the General Strike of 1929. These interpretations depict the 'intellectuals' and the 'ruling classes' as instituting English for the purpose of indoctrinating the 'masses', using texts – and interpretations – that were designed to promote harmony between social groups, deference to one's superiors and belief in the greatness of the British Empire.² Such accounts frequently acknowledge a debt to Raymond Williams's influential work on the connections between culture and the problems of social class, and are also influenced by theories of the mass market, which see art as a 'fetish' – something that has both a market value,

linking the rise of literature to the emergence of consumer capitalism, and a wide range of symbolic values, in its capacity to say something about its owner and reveal a special kind of 'truth'.³ The student of literature, in such a reading, is a bewildered figure: lured by the promise of gaining a particular (and ostensibly valuable) 'understanding' of the world at large, but in reality brainwashed by the forces of cultural hegemony.⁴

Such accounts have dominated attempts to trace the emergence of English. They received probably their most famous public airing in Terry Eagleton's hugely influential *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), and have been developed, along similar lines and using a remarkably similar vocabulary, by critics such as Brian Doyle and Peter Widdowson. For Terry Eagleton, the study of literature began as an 'ideological enterprise' that would 'rehearse the masses in the habits of pluralistic thought and feeling', reminding them of their place in a wider human enterprise and thus being 'admirably well-fitted to carry through the ideological task which religion left off'.⁵ In the same vein, Peter Widdowson describes the formation of the canon as a process that was 'deeply ideologically inscribed', with the teaching of literature being 'an ideologically-driven initiative to "humanise" and "civilise" potentially disruptive elements in a developing class-stratified society'.⁶ Brian Doyle argues that the concept of a 'literary' education is fundamentally just one more commodity within a capitalist, class-based society, aimed at 'those wishing to develop the kinds of taste required to participate in polite society'. The rise of English studies, therefore, is a process motivated by social rather than intellectual ends, with the discipline being promoted as 'uniquely suited to a mission of national cultivation'.⁷ The reader is left in no doubt as to the writers' own philosophy: whether it is an 'ideological enterprise' or an 'ideological task', 'ideologically driven' or 'deeply ideologically inscribed', the interchangeable descriptions remind us that English is a subject founded on a particular set of beliefs, and that these beliefs should be the subject of deep suspicion.

The work of these three critics is interesting in that it shares a common focus, and therefore has a tendency towards a common interpretation of historical material. Its Marxist foundations mean that it implements a model of causality that stresses the use of English as an instrument of power, and therefore produces a particular kind of disciplinary history. However, the extent to which this can be termed an *institutional* history is questionable. What is most significant about the work of these critics is its inclination to focus on what I shall call the 'metadiscourses' of the subject – the public arguments put forward to justify the inclusion of English in the curricula of various institutions – rather than on the forms

that the study of English actually took. Moreover, much of this analysis centres not on the universities, but on the development of English in the working men's colleges, Mechanics' Institutes and extension lecture circuits – institutions where a clear social agenda was at work, and where the rhetoric surrounding English is strikingly amenable to Marxist approaches. Doyle, for example, sees the establishment of academic English as part of a wider social movement developing between the 1880s and the 1920s, identified with events such as the publication of the Newbolt Report and the founding of the English Association, which sought to renew 'cultural leadership' by disseminating a sense of tradition, culture and national pride. Doyle comments: 'In this process any shadows of socialist organisation were to be dispersed by the radiance of a common culture and heritage.'⁸

A central figure in this cultural project is that of Matthew Arnold. Eagleton describes him as a 'key figure' in the construction of English as the subject best equipped to 'provide the social "cement", affective values and basic mythologies by which a socially turbulent class-society can be welded together',⁹ while Widdowson uses his desire to promote 'the best which has been thought and said in the world'¹⁰ as the starting-point for a discussion of the 'ideological imperatives and vested interests' that have given the study of literature its current status.¹¹ Yet Franklin Court has argued against 'the historical overemphasis' on Arnold as the 'straw-man', a figure who, 'if one is to play by the rules', must be seen as 'primarily responsible for the influence of the humanist myth out of which English literary study evolved'.¹² Such readings, so Court maintains, ignore Arnold's work on education and place undue emphasis on the rhetoric of 'high culture' contained within his social and literary criticism. Court points out that Arnold actually doubted whether the study of English literature should be given academic autonomy: Arnold felt that the trend towards institutional specialisation threatened the 'fullness of engagement'¹³ that the model academy should seek to promote. As we shall see in Chapter 5, such doubts were to be echoed in the misgivings of such centrally 'institutional' figures as I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot – commentators who (like Arnold) are often given a key role within the development of English studies, but whose view of criticism often stood at odds with the needs of academic professionalisation.

The 'problematic indifference to the historical process'¹⁴ that this elevation of Arnold involves is also apparent in its failure to address the processes of professionalisation and specialisation in more detail. For Arnold, criticism represented a form of knowledge that could not be quantified in conventional academic terms. In contrast, the earliest

degree courses in English defined valid literary 'knowledge' in terms of factual information that was easy to teach and examine. If, as Court argues, Arnold's opposition to academic specialisation has not been fully acknowledged, then this is perhaps because the gap between Arnold's ideals and the historical process of discipline-formation is an uneasy one. What this gap highlights is, in effect, the difference between two distinct methods of writing disciplinary history: one based on rhetoric, the other on a more documentary approach to institutions and syllabuses.

The failure of some theoreticians to recognise the distinction between the elevation of the critical spirit on the one hand, and the development of academic English on the other, is part of a continuing tendency to generalise about the emerging discipline of English and the forces that enabled it to take up its place in the universities. The most crucial of these generalisations is the ease with which the different types of educational institution existing in England in the mid- to late nineteenth century are collapsed into a notionally unified system, fuelled by the same motivations and operating along similar lines. By the start of this period, education in England took place at a number of different levels, in a number of different types of institution, that can be divided broadly into the schools (including the elementary schools, grammar schools and public schools); the adult education movement; and the universities, both ancient and modern.¹⁵ Each type of institution would have had its own agendas and concerns with regard to what can broadly be termed 'the teaching of English', encompassing a range of activities that included the teaching of functional literacy skills, the so-called 'poor man's Classics' of the institutes for adult education and the philological study that then dominated English at Oxford. However, Marxist accounts often collapse all these separate categories into one all-consuming yet fictional 'institution' that has no existence beyond the realms of rhetoric. Peter Widdowson's reference to 'the institutionalisation of "Literature" in the academy'¹⁶ [my emphasis] is one such example. The term 'the academy' functions here as a metaphorical term, with a symbolic resonance that secures its place within a Marxist discourse predicated on a model of base and superstructure. However, as a historical term, it has no meaning: there has never been such a thing as 'the academy', a single, all-powerful institution, within the English educational system. The use of this term as shorthand for such an institution can therefore carry no currency. The institutionalisation of literature was not a simple, unified process, but a piecemeal development that happened for different reasons, and at different stages, in the different educational establishments that existed in England at this time.

A similar process is at work in Brian Doyle's analysis, in which the rise of English studies in the higher education system is described as the result of a 'national' process of institutionalisation. In *English and Englishness* (1989), Doyle argues that one of the most notable features of the discipline's history is its rise from a position of inferiority to one of cultural and educational prominence: that through an 'unlikely course of events', the 'low status symbolic materials' of functional literacy were 'transformed into a high status discipline which came to occupy a central place within the national curriculum'.¹⁷ Yet like Widdowson, Doyle uses a number of terms whose validity needs to be questioned. First, and most obvious, is his reference to the 'national curriculum' – a term that, like Widdowson's 'academy', has no real meaning in relation to the educational systems in place in the late nineteenth century. Secondly, there is the sleight of hand with which functional literacy is elided with the study of English literature, with Doyle's preferred term 'transformed' implying, obviously, a change in the nature of English rather than a gradual multiplication of its forms. Within the terms of Doyle's analysis, this 'transformation' does indeed seem extraordinary: however, in order to accept this, one also has to view both 'English' and the education system as being single, unified institutions. What seems to be absent is a recognition of the different discourses that were at work in each of the different types of institution where English was taught. The ideal of social reform – which plays a key role in Doyle's understanding of the discipline's rise to prominence – was not universally acknowledged or acted upon.

Of similar concern is the way in which primary evidence has been used by these commentators to support interpretations that are not sustained by a more careful consideration of the sources. Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small have drawn attention to Brian Doyle's partial reading of A. C. Bradley's inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, arguing that Doyle fails to acknowledge Bradley's insistence that the study of literature needed to be defined in epistemological terms rather than justified through moral or political arguments.¹⁸ Meanwhile, in Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, the words of George Gordon, an early Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford, are used to support an interpretation that is quite significantly flawed. According to Eagleton, Gordon claimed in his inaugural lecture that

England is sick, and [...] English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature now has a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State.¹⁹