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ENGLISH STUDIES: THE STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE, PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Edited by

Niall Gildea, Helena Goodwyn, Megan Kitching, and Helen Tyson

English Studies: The State of the Discipline, Past, Present, and Future

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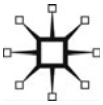

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Contents

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Introduction – English Studies: The State of the Discipline, Past, Present, and Future

Niall Gildea, Helena Goodwyn, Megan Kitching and Helen Tyson

Abstract: *Introducing English Studies: The State of the Discipline, Past, Present, and Future, the editors trace some historical and contemporary debates surrounding English Studies in the university. Niall Gildea, Helena Goodwyn, Megan Kitching and Helen Tyson discuss the present threats to English and consider how critics of the discipline might capitalize on its problematic history of self-definition. Although indispensable for much work in English studies, this problem of self-definition simultaneously provides an avenue for instrumentalist attacks on the discipline. The challenge facing English scholars today is to position ourselves responsibly vis-à-vis this paradox, and at the same time to articulate what we value in English Studies. The authors introduce the essays that follow, indicating how these exemplify this crucial responsibility.*

Gildea, Niall, Helena Goodwyn, Megan Kitching, and Helen Tyson, eds. *English Studies: The State of the Discipline, Past, Present, and Future*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. DOI: 10.1057/9781137478054.0004.

> The past is not erased but haunts the present. Thus, the traumatic return of repressed memory is a constant threat. To inhabit the ruins of the University must be to practice an institutional pragmatism that recognizes the threat rather than to seek to redeem the epistemological uncertainty by recourse to the plenitude of aesthetic sensation (nostalgia) or epistemological mastery (knowledge as progress).[1]

In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings exhorted his readers to 'recognize that the University is a *ruined institution*, while thinking what it means to dwell in those ruins without recourse to romantic nostalgia'.[2] Tracing the history of the modern university as 'producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture', Readings highlighted the centrality of the English Department to the idea of the university in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain and America.[3] In the age of globalization, Readings argued, this intimate relationship between the nation-state and the university has come undone. And yet, Readings invoked a relationship to the past in which the past is always still present; there is always a danger of recourse to a conservative, nationalist conception of the English Department. 'We should not attempt', Readings wrote, 'to bring about a rebirth or renaissance of the University, but think its ruins as the sedimentation of historical differences'.[4]

English Studies: The State of the Discipline, Past, Present, and Future is an attempt, in the face of current challenges, to trace – without resorting to nostalgia or despair – some of the historical and contemporary debates pertaining to English Studies in the university. In the opening chapter, Ben Knights echoes Readings in his description of the discipline as a 'sedimented history of negotiations across borders' – a history which students carry with them 'through accretions of acquired social memory'. Knights' essay, like the others in this volume, demonstrates the ways in which we carry the past of our discipline (and our institutions) with us – we inherit the entangled negotiations of the past like a form of culturally and socially acquired collective unconscious. Committed to a belief that we cannot understand the state of the discipline today, or imagine the discipline of tomorrow, without some attempt to engage with this past, this book nonetheless takes heed of Readings' warning: we should not turn to the past in a quest for redemption.

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But what do we mean when we talk about the 'State of the Discipline'? Of course, in one sense of the word 'state' we are talking about the relationship between English and *the* state – the condition of the subject (to borrow a phrase from Philip W. Martin) as defined by its relationship to government funding (or its absence) and policy.[5] On the other hand, naming as it does a nation-state and a language as well as an academic discipline, English solicits particularly fraught psychical and political investments from those both inside and outside of the university walls. 'The point about "English" as the name of a subject', wrote Colin Evans, 'is that it is an adjective being made to serve as a noun. So "English" is always pointing towards an absence – the noun. Is the subject English literature, language, society, culture, people?'[6] There is no consensus on this matter, but what is certain is that the nominal lack, which somehow constitutes the very name of the subject, has experienced many attempted compensations. Constructed, as Ben Knights notes, out of the projections and desires of a diverse set of (sometimes) warring tribes of academics, teachers, students, governmental policy makers and the wider public, English is a peculiarly over-determined state, freighted with the often conflicting, conscious and unconscious, desires of these various individuals and groups.

Not only is English an over-determined subject, but it is also one that is frequently perceived to be in a state of crisis. In *What Are Universities For?* Stefan Collini describes how the term 'humanities' in its contemporary sense first came to prominence in the USA in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The term was itself a response to 'an aggressive form of positivism that promoted the supposed methods of the natural sciences as the basis for all true knowledge'.[7] If the 'humanities' can therefore be said to have come into existence on the defensive, it was also 'uncontroversial', when in 1964 a Pelican Original entitled *Crisis in the Humanities* was published. As Collini observes:

> This brief history signals two related themes which have remained characteristic of so much discourse about the humanities: first, it has largely been reactive and has thus tended to have a defensive or vindicatory edge to it in a way not true of most discourse about 'the sciences'; and secondly, the humanities turn out to be almost always in 'crisis'. There has been a good deal of writing under that heading in the USA in the past decade, and a similar urge to draw the wagons into a circle is evident in the humanities departments of British universities at present in response to recent government policies.[8]

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As a relatively young subject within the humanities, English itself carries an anxiety about subject definition. But cries of 'crisis', and the reactionary tone that comes alongside such cries, are not always helpful. The defensive mentality can trigger an urge to shore up identity, to build up protective walls and to insist too narrowly on the drawing of boundaries. To proclaim that English is in a state of crisis might lead only to unwelcome forms of entrenchment.

And yet, the humanities and English Studies in UK universities are, as Robert Eaglestone puts it bluntly in this volume, 'under threat'. Andrew McGettigan, author of *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*, writes: 'An experiment is being conducted on English universities; one that is not controlled and that in the absence of any compelling evidence for change threatens an internationally admired and efficient system.'[9] Part of this 'great gamble' involves the cuts to Higher Education made by the current UK Coalition government. In the wake of the global financial crisis, this government ushered in a series of cuts as part of its austerity policy. In the Comprehensive Spending Review of October 2010, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that the block grant received by universities to support undergraduate teaching would be cut from £5 billion to roughly £2 billion. While medicine, science, engineering and technology teaching budgets have been (to some extent) protected, the public funding of the humanities has been abolished in a move towards privatization.[10] In December 2010, against a backdrop of massive protest on the streets of London, the government voted to raise the maximum tuition fee at state-funded universities to £9,000 per year. As McGettigan notes, although fees were first introduced in 1998 as *additional funding* to supplement the block grant, the replacement of public funding with £9,000 fees is part of a concerted ideological move, rushed in under the guise of an austerity measure, towards the '*internal privatisation* of the university'.[11]

Despite this move towards privatization, teachers and researchers are faced with mounting expectations that we contribute tangible benefits to society. For better or for worse, Performance-Based Research Funding (and its attendant acronyms) is now a familiar feature of the global academic landscape.[12] In the UK, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) established under Thatcher was discontinued in 2008, only to be replaced with the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which continues the mission to measure the international 'impact' of research. The impact of such measures on the humanities themselves has since been

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