Why Teach English?

Whence, and where, and why the English major? The subject is in every mouth—or, at least, is getting kicked around agitatedly in columns and reviews and Op-Ed pieces. The English major is vanishing from our colleges as the Latin prerequisite vanished before it, we're told, a dying choice bound to a dead subject. The estimable Verlyn Klinkenborg reports in the *Times* that "At Pomona College (my alma mater) this spring, 16 students graduated with an English major out of a student body of 1,560, a terribly small number," and from other, similar schools, other, similar numbers.

In response, a number of defenses have been mounted, none of them, so far, terribly persuasive even to one rooting for them to persuade. As the bromides roll by and the platitudes chase each other round the page, those

in favor of ever more and better English majors feel a bit the way we Jets fans feel, every fall, when our offense trots out on the field: I'm cheering as loud as I can, but let's be honest—this is not working well.

The defenses and apologias come in two kinds: one insisting that English majors make better people, the other that English majors (or at least humanities majors) make for better societies; that, as Christina Paxson, the president of Brown University, just put it in *The New Republic*, " there are real, tangible benefits to the humanistic disciplines—to the study of history, literature, art, theater, music, and languages." Paxson's piece is essentially the kind of Letter To A Crazy Republican Congressman that university presidents get to write. We need the humanities, she explains patiently, because they may end up giving us other stuff we actually like: "We do not always know the future benefits of what we study and therefore should not rush to reject some forms of research as less deserving than others."

Well, a humanities major may make an obvious contribution to everyone's welfare. But the truth is that for every broadly humane, technological-minded guy who contributed one new gadget to our prosperity there are six narrow, on-the-spectrum techno-obsessives who contributed twenty. Even Paxson's insistence that, after 9/11, it was valuable to have experts on Islam around is sadly dubious; it was Bernard Lewis, a leading scholar on the subject, who consulted closely with Dick Cheney before the Iraq War, with the results we know.

Nor do humanities specialists, let alone English majors, seem to be particularly humane or thoughtful or open-minded people, as the alternative better-people defense insists. No one was better read than the

English upper classes who, a hundred years ago, blundered into the catastrophe of the Great War. (They wrote good poetry about it, the ones who survived anyway.) Victorian factory owners read Dickens, but it didn't make Victorian factories nicer. (What made them nicer was people who read Dickens and Mill and then petitioned Parliament.)

So why have English majors? Well, because many people like books. Most of those like to talk about them after they've read them, or while they're in the middle. Some people like to talk about them so much that they want to spend their lives talking about them to other people who like to listen. Some of us do this all summer on the beach, and others all winter in a classroom. One might call this a natural or inevitable consequence of literacy. And it's this living, irresistible, permanent interest in reading that supports English departments, and makes sense of English majors.

Bill James dealt with this point wonderfully once, in talking about whether baseball is, as so many people within it insist, really a business, and not a sport at all. Well, James pointed out, if the sporting interest in baseball died, baseball would die; but if the business of baseball died—which, given all those empty ringside seats at Yankee Stadium, doesn't seem impossible—but the sporting interest persisted, baseball would be altered, but it wouldn't die. It would just reconstitute itself in a different way.

And so with English departments: if we closed down every English department in the country, loud, good, expert, or at least hyper-enthusiastic readers would still emerge. One sees this happening already, in the steady pulse of reading groups and books clubs which form, in effect, a kind of archipelago of amateur English departments. The woman with the

notebook and the detailed parsing of how each love affair echoes each other in "Swann's Way" is already an English professor manqué. (Or, rather, a comp-lit professor.)

If we abolished English majors tomorrow, Stephen Greenblatt and Stanley Fish and Helen Vendler would not suddenly be freed to use their smarts to start making quantum proton-nuclear reactor cargo transporters, or whatever; they would all migrate someplace where they could still talk Shakespeare and Proust and the rest. Indeed, before there were English professors, there were... English professors. Dr. Johnson was the greatest English professor who ever lived—the great cham of literature, to whom all turned, Harold Bloom plus-plus—and he never had a post, let alone tenure, and his "doctorate" was one of those honorary jobs they give you, after a lifetime of literary labor, for Fine Effort. The best reading and talking about books was, in the past, often done by people who had to make their living doing something else narrowly related: Hazlitt by writing miscellaneous journalism, Sydney Smith by pretending to be a clergyman.

So then, the critic Lee Siegel asks, quite pertinently, why don't we just take books out of the academy, where they don't belong, and put them back in the living room, where they do? The best answer is a conservative one: institutions don't always have a good reason for existing, but there are very few institutions that do exist that didn't get invented for a reason. The space between a practice and a profession is as wide as any social space can be. And what professions do that practices can't is remain open to what used to be called "the talents." To have turned the habits of reading and obsessing over books from a practice mostly for those rich enough to have the time to do it into one that welcomes, for a time anyway, anyone who can is

momentous. English departments democratize the practice of reading. When they do, they make the books of the past available to all. It's a simple but potent act.

I am, let me add quickly, a living witness to this: my father is the son of a Jewish immigrant butcher and grocer, a wise man but hardly a reader. My father, who loves to read, worked his way through Penn, back when you could, to become… a professor of English, with a specialty in the eighteenth-century wits, Pope and Richardson and Swift and Fielding. Without an English department and an English major, he would never have had a chance to make that journey in so short and successful a time—and, I feel bound to say, the practice of talking about books would have been poorer for it. (Mine would, certainly.) The best way we've found to make sure that everyone who loves to talk about books have a place to do it is to have English departments around.

The study of English, to be sure, suffers from its own discontents: it isn't a science, and so the "research" you do is, as my colleague Louis Menand has pointed out, archival futzing aside, not really research. But the best answer I have ever heard from a literature professor for studying literature came from a wise post-structuralist critic. Why was he a professor of literature? "Because I have an obsessive relationship with texts." You choose a major, or a life, not because you see its purpose, which tends to shimmer out of sight like an oasis, but because you like its objects. A good doctor said to me, not long ago, "You really sort of have to like assholes and ear wax to be a good general practitioner"; you have to really like, or not mind much, intricate and dull and occasionally even dumb arguments about books to study English.

The reward is that it remains the one kind of time travel that works, where you make a wish and actually become a musketeer in Paris or a used-car salesman in Pennsylvania. That one knows, of course, that the actuality is "fictional" or artificial doesn't change its reality. The vicarious pleasure of reading is, by the perverse principle of professions, one that is often banished from official discussion, but it remains the core activity.

So: Why should English majors exist? Well, there really are no whys to such things, anymore than there are to why we wear clothes or paint good pictures or live in more than hovels and huts or send flowers to our beloved on their birthday. No sane person proposes or has ever proposed an entirely utilitarian, production-oriented view of human purpose. We cannot merely produce goods and services as efficiently as we can, sell them to each other as cheaply as possible, and die. Some idea of symbolic purpose, of pleasure-seeking rather than rent seeking, of Doing Something Else, is essential to human existence. That's why we pass out tax breaks to churches, zoning remissions to parks, subsidize new ballparks and point to the density of theatres and galleries as signs of urban life, to be encouraged if at all possible. When a man makes a few billion dollars, he still starts looking around for a museum to build a gallery for or a newspaper to buy. No civilization we think worth studying, or whose relics we think worth visiting, existed without what amounts to an English department—texts that mattered, people who argued about them as if they mattered, and a sense of shame among the wealthy if they couldn't talk about them, at least a little, too. It's what we call civilization.

Even if we read books and talk about them for four years, and then do something else more obviously remunerative, it won't be time wasted. We

need the humanities not because they will produce shrewder entrepreneurs or kinder C.E.O.s but because, as that first professor said, they help us enjoy life more and endure it better. The reason we need the humanities is because we're human. That's enough.

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