English, Autonomy, and the Republic of Letters

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In Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), the term *Literature* is placed more or less in between the term *Liberation* and the term *Management*: which might also more or less capture the predicament of the professional study of literature—the various interests and practices that continue to gather together under the nebulous heading of English—at tertiary institutions today. Although Williams mentions *literary criticism* in his entry, he has nothing much to say about English as a discipline and a profession: its modern history, the range of interests it encompasses, and the 'communities' it fosters and depends upon. The question of what *kind* of discipline English is—what it does or should do, how it does it, and to what end—is certainly worth pursuing and I shall say something about this later on. But the question of English as a set of communities, a discipline defined by forms of sociality, is also important, both to its future and to its past. Of course, we routinely think of English today not as a community at all but as a fractured, fragmented and promiscuous practice that plays host to a range of methodologies, touching many other disciplines in the process, and covering a remarkably diverse array (or disarray) of texts and topics. It is methodology that fractures English most of all, as we know only too well when we are asked to define it in our ARC grant applications: where 'Approach and Method' is always the weakest section, the part of an application that seems to be the most difficult to articulate, not least because the discipline that the ARC broadly identifies as 'Literature Studies' has indeed been so methodologically porous, so entangled by the methods and practices of other disciplines it affiliates to generally at the expense of developing a discrete identity for itself.

This is not the view of Marjorie Garber, who in her book, *A Manifesto for Literary Studies* (2003), identifies literary studies through 'the way it *differs* from other disciplines—in its methodology and in its aim—rather than in the way it resembles them' (12). Literary studies takes literature as its object of study, obviously enough. But what this object can be made to signify—how it can be put to work, read and understood—is always negotiable. Garber speaks up for the relative autonomy of literary studies, relishing literature's ahistorical resonances—'style, form, genre ... grammar, rhetoric, and syntax; tropes and figures; assonance and echo'—its playfulness and its irreducibility (12). But

she also thinks that the particularity of academic English lies in its prioritising of 'human nature' and human freedom. This is a humanist, secular and countercultural defence of a discipline, which is hardly new as a defence and in fact speaks to a long, complicated and often non-secular history of literary formations. It takes us back to the question of community and how we might think this through in relation to literary study and literary production. One point of origin might lie in the 'republic of letters', a term—as Anne Goldgar has noted—that first appeared in western Europe (in Germany and across the Continent) in the fifteenth century and was used more frequently in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to account for an increasingly affiliated group of literary writers and scholars (2). Goldgar's focus is on French Huguenot scholar-refugees as they resettled in Protestant countries such as England in the early eighteenth century; but a notion of community—bound in this case by the predicament of exile and 'an ethos of international and nonsectarian cooperation'(9)—is central to her understanding of their literary imperatives. Her argument is that 'the scholarly world considered itself to be in some ways separate from the rest of society' (3), professionalised as some members might be: this is an early version of Garber's sense of the relative autonomy of university-based English today. Habermas's notion of the eighteenth century public sphere—as a site of sociality and institutionalisation that saw the formation of a politically engaged bourgeois civil society—provides an important point of contrast here (Habermas), because for Goldgar this earlier republic of letters was much more inward-looking and politically detached. 'Their work was not primarily directed at public utility', she writes, 'their ideal society was not intended for general emulation, and the political aspect of their lives was to be divorced absolutely from their scholarship' (Goldgar 6). Moreover, their sense of themselves was informal almost to the point of fantasy. 'Unlike an academy or learned society', Goldgar suggests, this republic of letters 'existed only in the minds of its members. Its regulations and even its membership were nebulous at best, and any contemporary definition tended to be articulated in protest at the violation of these unwritten rules, suggesting, among other things, that they were as well-defined as they were usually unexpressed' (2).

There is an familiar available narrative here which sees the transition away from the 'old' republic of letters as a process of modernisation and social engagement: through, for example, the transition from the 'small and close-knit' neo-Latin *érudits* in France at the end of the seventeenth century to the 'relatively more public, open and democratic' world of the *philosophes* (Shelford 3). Other scholarship, however, has troubled the contrast conventionally drawn between this older republic of letters and the Enlightenment. L.W. B. Brockliss's *Calvet's Web: Enlightenment and the Republic of Letters in France* (2002) turns to a later, minor figure in this literary community (a Catholic physician but also a man of letters, ordinary, provincial) in order to show that—politically disengaged

as it was—this community of *érudits* could nevertheless be critical of the *ancien régime* and was drawn to the modern, secular Voltairean notion of ‘civic patriotism’ (400) and cosmopolitan ideal. For Brockliss, the *petit monde* of the old republic of letters is not an anachronism, nor did it die away:

if anything, as the eighteenth century wore on the Republic went from strength to strength. ... Although individual members might have their particular interests, the community remained a self-conscious entity, wedded to the pursuit of knowledge *tout court*. It was only at the end of the century that its members began to split up into disciplinary clusters, and specialist journals, especially in Germany, began to appear. (8-9)

Even specialisation brings with it not the end of a sense of community but—if I can draw on Durkheim’s account of the division of labour in modernity—new, institutionalised ‘organic solidarities’ that can also tolerate eclecticism. How ‘progressive’ all this might be is open to debate, of course: the kind of debate we still have around the nature of English in universities today.

In my book, *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice* (2007), I look closely at the concept of *community* and suggest that it shares some structural features with the concept of a *subculture*, but that it is also different to that concept in several important ways. We might ask: is the *petit monde* of English a community or a subculture? And the answer would be in part: it depends on who or what it affiliates to or distinguishes itself from. Subcultures do not as a rule have something equivalent to class consciousness; they float either above class—since subcultures are generally elitist and self-absorbed (rather like conventional accounts of the *érudits*)—or below it, as Marx had noted when he identified the *literati* with the *lumpenproletariat* in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851-52); and of course, *literati* remains a pejorative term even now, among some journalists for example. The beginning of the eighteenth century saw the values of the old republic of letters reaffirmed by emerging literary conservatives in Britain such as Swift and Pope, with their high Augustan ideals: tied to what Paula McDowell calls ‘courtly, manuscript literary culture’(4) and linking itself to the ‘paternal, stable, and rational figure of the landed [i.e. propertied] citizen’ (Ingrassia 3). On the other hand, the early eighteenth century also saw a rapidly developing culture of literary production which, far from being courtly and stable, instead threw itself into the everyday commonplaces of commercial transaction. This unstable and often illicit realm of literary production and commentary was popularly referred to as Grub Street and we think of it—especially after Pat Rogers’ important, early book on the subject (Rogers 1972)—not as a community but as a *subculture*: a ‘brotherhood’ of ‘Scribblers’, hack biographers and plagiarists, publishers, print workers, street-hawkers and ballad-singers, living in close proximity to counterfeiters, beggars, prostitutes and refugees from the continent: all of whom, for Rogers, were more or less united in their relationship

to the law (which harassed them) and their distance from the Augustans (who satirised them and called upon the law to police them). Women participated in Grub Street, too: Paula McDowell suggests that participation in commercial print culture enabled 'a new mode of association for women', although she argues that they probably formed a 'series of heterogeneous collectivities, rather than a homogeneous "subculture"' (11, 31).

The usual account of the transformation of the republic of letters in Britain in the eighteenth century is that it became less disinterested, less inward-looking, and more concerned with its growing social obligations as well as its relationship to commercial literary practices. Paul Keen, in *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (1999), in fact draws these two features together: 'This redefinition of the republic of letters in terms of its relations to its wider context was reinforced by the increasingly commercial nature of British society' (31). For Keen, the literary subculture of Grub Street was more representative of modern literary trends than the high Augustanism of Pope precisely because it tied literary activity to ambitious professional and commercial practices. The dominant image of the author in the 1790s was not the Romantic fantasy of the author as social outcast, remote from the banalities of the everyday commercial world. Instead, he writes, it was

closely tied to what was perhaps the most powerful ideological achievement of the long middle-class revolution: the prestige of the professional. ... The struggle to define literature according to various social and political perspectives (a struggle whose implications we are still living with today) was inseparably related to the professional ambitions of authors to establish the prestige of their position. (78)

The social prestige of literary culture was defined not only in terms of its connection to the 'polite classes' (although this remains important) but also through its 'intellectual industriousness' (79): the kind of industriousness that Carlyle later on worked into a rigorous program of austerity and self-discipline as a way of defining the critic as a masculinist hero-figure and, of course, the kind of industriousness that academic English today knows so well as its practitioners are ranked within a framework of high-level research indicators.

This articulation of social prestige distinguished itself from both the aristocracy and the lumpenproletariat by *not* becoming parasitic or dependent on state patronage, even though it appropriated some of the privileges of the former and some of the anti-bourgeois bohemianisms of the latter. The political role of the republic of letters, however, was still of concern, with literary culture seeming to be both peculiar—with its own rules of conduct and idiosyncratic values—and yet open to almost anyone: specialised and eclectic simultaneously. Isaac D'Israeli, the father of the Conservative British Prime Minister Benjamin

D'Israeli, was the son of a Jewish merchant who had emigrated to England from Italy. A neglected figure in literary history these days, his *Curiosities of Literature* (1791-1823) went through many reprints and made him a celebrated literary figure at the time. Becoming increasingly conservative himself, D'Israeli came to see the republic of letters as an elite, politically disengaged, secular social world. 'Literary investigation', he wrote in *Miscellanies*, 'is allied neither to politics nor religion; it is a science consecrated to the few; abstracted from all the factions on earth; and independent of popular discontents and popular delusions' (cited in London 2005, 356). On the other hand, D'Israeli also gave almost the exact opposite view in *Curiosities of Literature*, where the republic of letters is seen by contrast as open and dispersed, cosmopolitan and vernacular, and—far from being abstracted from factions—just as factional, and fractured, as anything else:

Never was a republic greater, better peopled, more free, or more glorious: it is spread on the face of the earth, and is composed of persons of every nation, of every rank, of every age, and of both sexes. They are intimately acquainted with every language, the dead as well as the living. To the cultivation of letters they join that of the arts; and mechanics are also permitted to occupy a place. But their religion cannot boast of uniformity; and their manners, like those of every other republic, form a mixture of good and of evil: they are sometimes enthusiastically pious, and sometimes insanely impious.

The politics of this state consist rather in words, in vague maxims and ingenious reflections, than in actions, or their effects. This people owe all their strength to the brilliancy of their eloquence, and the solidity of their arguments. Their trade is perfectly intellectual, and their riches very moderate; they live in one continued strife for glory, and for immortality. Their dress is by no means splendid; yet they affect to despise those who labour through the impulse of avarice or necessity.

They are divided into many sects, and they seem to multiply every day.
(D'Israeli)

I have been talking about these early formations of literary communities—these republics of letters—because it seems to me that this is where we find the origins of the academic discipline of English as we know it today, and where we find articulations of exactly the issues and problems that English continues to be plagued by: how inward-looking it is and what kind of relative autonomy it can lay claim to; how disinterested it can afford to be and, conversely, what levels of social and political engagement it might play out, what its relationship to 'popular discontents' might actually be; what kinds of affiliations it draws on to shore up its sense of itself as a community; and alongside this, how sectarian

or factional it can become before it loses its identity as a discipline altogether. It wasn't long ago that Edward Said, in a piece called 'Restoring Intellectual Coherence' (1999), felt that university English departments were places where the study of literature as a thing-in-itself had all but disappeared: as if the discipline is now so sectarian and fractured (simultaneously insular and dispersed) as to be unidentifiable. Michael Bérubé, in his book *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies* (1998), has noted that, as the academic study of literature integrated into wider systems of communication and signification such as cultural studies, film studies, gender and sexuality studies, ethnicity studies and so on, it did indeed lose its 'closeness' to literary works even as it increased its bid for contemporary relevance and enabled its graduates to become more employable. On the other hand, English (even after the onslaught of theory) continues to commit itself to the human and humanist values that Marjorie Garber calls for, as if this is the thing that still continues to make it what it is: as we see, for example, in J. Hillis Miller's recent book, *Literature as Conduct* (2005), which returns to Henry James to tell us that the study of literature is a necessary 'part of the conduct of life' (2): a humanist rephrasing, surely, of Ian Hunter's earlier, more austere view of English as, literally, a discipline, a particular form of politico-ethical training.

We can think about the recent turn to ethics in literary studies as a reaffirmation of the republic of letters' socially progressive and increasingly secular project: pitched somewhere between Plato's proposition about the civic role of literature in a just republic (to illustrate the 'virtuous life') and the Enlightenment view of reading as reflection and self-reflection, a way of comprehending otherness. But the encouragement of reflection and self-reflection can often do little to change the discipline's perceived inward-lookingness, and it does not really change the prevailing sense of English as a relatively autonomous community still preoccupied with the expression of its own uniqueness, the special aspects of its specialisation. Edward Said—who was one of the more outward-looking examples of a literary scholar—nevertheless reaffirms the relative autonomy of the discipline when he writes at the beginning of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) that 'I have availed myself of the utopian space still provided by the university, which I believe must remain a place where such vital issues are investigated, discussed, reflected on' (xxvi). This is again resonant of the Habermasian notion of an idealised public sphere, forming itself embryonically in coffee house discussions and debates during the eighteenth century. It might be overstating the matter to draw on Michael Warner's term and call the *petit monde* of university English a 'counterpublic', although it has indeed, from time to time, been characterised by 'alternative dispositions' built around an often anxiously-registered sense of both its prestige and its subordination (Warner *Publics*, 56). William R. Paulson, in *Literary Culture in a World Transformed: A*

Future for the Humanities (2001), speaks of English as ‘a guild that fancies itself a counter-culture’ and writes about the ‘drive for autonomy’ in academic literary studies that plays itself out through

a scholar’s suspicion of a colleague who writes for nonacademic audiences, in the “serious” writer’s disdain for the success of the best-selling novelist, and in the literary and artistic assumption that creative individuals should break free from middle-class taste and morality. (186, 4)

These hierarchies of taste (already apparent in the Grub Street conflicts) certainly work to structure English which, as a teaching profession, produces linguistic capital through training in reading and writing, and symbolic and cultural capital which then operate as identifiers of social prestige or distinction (to draw on Pierre Bourdieu). But they also ensure its social marginality. One of the problems for English is that its relative autonomy pulls it in both directions. It continues to stage its prestige in a variety of ways: promoting the virtues of pure research (‘curiosity’) over the more labour-intensive but lower-division task of teaching; keeping itself at one remove from the pressure to justify itself vocationally; turning to abstraction and theory (primarily responsible for the fracturing of English over the years, although the ‘turn to theory’ is now more or less over); distancing itself from mass media (areas of interest for media studies and cultural studies, not literary studies); and, in spite of D’Israeli’s sense that the republic of letters is composed ‘of persons of every nation’, remaining more or less monocultural and monolingual, still tied primarily to the literature of Britain which continues to be taught and researched by British- Australian- or US-educated, invariably white academics, with only a few notable exceptions (including Said). It remains relatively independent from social, economic and political relations precisely because it doesn’t affect them—or affects them only in the slightest sense. Yet in Australia and elsewhere government bureaucrats make funding available to ‘Literature Studies’— albeit modestly—in spite of the fact that the discipline is far from clear about its identity and purpose. Indeed, the disinterestedness of academic English may help this to be so; its social and political disengagement may be precisely the thing that allows it to continue to receive money from the state. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has noted, ‘politicians and administrators are more deeply convinced of the existential values inherent to literature than we are’ (Gumbrecht). It may be the sublime, rather than the worldly, aspects of English that earn it the money that it gets today.

This is not entirely true, of course: the state can invest in English as a matter of national ideology, too, and it has done so for some considerable time. The recently-filled, federally-funded Chair in Australian Literature at the University of Western Australia was an initiative developed as a response to the previous Liberal government’s call for a national curriculum, where Australian Literature (much like Australian History) is given a role to play in the formation of Australian

citizenships and the development of a national consciousness. The ties between a modern nation and its literature—something that Raymond Williams also discusses in his entry for Literature in *Keywords*—have been usefully chronicled in the United States where Michael Warner, this time in his book *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America* (1990), has argued for a ‘perfect reciprocity’ (71) between print culture, the public sphere and nascent politics in America: as if the republic of letters and the ideals of republicanism seem literally to go hand in hand. The republic of letters *is* the public sphere in this account, with literature—in Gerald Graff’s words—seen as ‘an extension of public forms of speech and argument’ (Graff 19). The shift from this early sense of an American republic of letters to actual American Literary Studies as a university discipline was traced out in Graff’s important book, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987). Once upon a time in America, literature was seen to be ‘social in point of view, not egocentric’, a means of illustrating not just grammar and rhetoric and style, but ‘civic and religious ideals’ (Graff 19). But the professionalisation of literature in English departments, underwritten by specialised and often esoteric topics for research, meant that fewer people could join in the discussion. Literary scholarship detached itself from topics of general interest and from generally shared social and political ideals, and in the process (wittingly or otherwise) frustrated rather than upheld the cause of cultural nationalism (Graff 13). Various moments of increased American patriotism (during the First World War and the Cold War) saw American Literary Studies recover its social mission; but as we know, New Criticism, as it developed in the late 1930s and ran through at least to the 1960s, disengaged literary criticism from social and political imperatives pretty much altogether, mystifying the author and emphasising the purer aesthetic practice of close reading. A polemical anthology of essays edited by Frank Lentricchia and Andrew Dubois with the awkward title, *Close Reading: The Reader* (2003), returns to the New Criticism as an influential point of departure for academic English, and ties it to the ‘post-New Criticism’ emphasis on close reading that we find in, say, Derrida with its emphasis on linguistic play, signification and performance. But although they want to recover close reading as the proper disciplinary practice for literary studies, Lentricchia and Dubois are also uncomfortable with the implication that—as it concentrates once more upon its lost objects, literature and its authors—English must therefore once again be inward-looking and autonomous, directed not to any kind of community (not even a community of scholars and readers) but only to the self, to self-reflection and self-realisation. So they make some space for *political* close reading:

Political reading is also capable of fulfilling the humanist promise of reading as self-education, as a tutorial on the self (perhaps paradoxically so, insofar as politics is essentially interpersonal. Reading itself, with or without an explicit politics, is paradoxical in the same way). In

reading politically, the reader may find a more elaborate or compelling articulation of what was otherwise only felt. This process can make the initial felt politics more effective, since what is felt needs articulation to allow for practical collective action. (31)

This venture into the literary-political, however, seems somehow to confuse or conflate the distinctions one might conventionally draw between the 'self' and the 'interpersonal': self and community. It retains a mystified sense of the prestige of literary studies (as if prior to close reading we are somehow politically inarticulate) and makes a quantum leap from close reading as 'self-education' to the real possibility of 'practical collective action': considerably upping the ante even on Warner's thesis that the republic of letters in America provided the necessary foundation for U.S. republicanism. It also reminds us once again of the contradictory predicament of English as a discipline, wanting autonomy and collectivity to inhabit each other even as it drives them apart: retaining something special for itself that might (or might not) enable the scholar to return better equipped to the realm of the social-political; and in the process, simultaneously articulating and obfuscating its purpose.

The introduction to this anthology about close reading ends by invoking Franco Moretti, well known nowadays for thinking not about national literatures but *world literature*, and for advocating not close reading but (in order to do at least some justice to the massively increased literary field the concept of world literature brings with it) what he has called *distant reading* (Moretti 56-8): all in the name of renovating the discipline of English, of making it literally more 'worldly' and globally engaged. We know, of course, that the ideal of world literature is not new: as Moretti reminds us, we find it advocated by Goethe in 1827 and by Marx in 1848, both of whom saw world literature as a way of transcending national 'narrow-mindedness' and providing access to some sort of global literary community: the kind of republic of letters D'Israeli had imagined around the end of the eighteenth century, 'composed of persons of every nation'. It can still seem as if the notion of world literature is a new one, co-opted recently and a little pretentiously by cultural studies through Rob Wilson and Christopher Connery's anthology, *The Worlding Project* (2007), which looks at some cultural uses of 'world space'. But world literature has a longer history, tied to Philology and Comparative Literature: two of the more marginal subdivisions of academic English today in Britain and Australia, although not in the United States where Comparative Literature still flourishes (with English at Princeton, for example, as just one program among a number of others participating under this broad heading). William L. Richardson and Jesse M. Owen's book, *Literature of the World: An Introductory Study*, was published in 1922 and began with a chapter on 'Literature of the Orient': 'Literature', they tell us, 'frees us from provinciality. ... Through literature we become citizens of the world'

(2). Joseph Shipley's *Dictionary of World Literature* was published in 1943 and Shipley had gained his PhD in comparative literature from Columbia University in 1931. Albert Guerard's *Preface to World Literature* was published in 1940; he was a Professor of Comparative Literature at Stanford University who reputedly discovered the American novelist John Hawkes, and wrote an important book on Joseph Conrad. Conrad was also the favourite novelist of Edward Said, whose PhD and first book in 1966 was devoted to this 'internationalist' author, someone who for Said was 'outside the English centre' and who possessed, rather like those French Huguenot refugee-scholars who were part of the old republic of letters, a 'strange sort of exilic consciousness' (Said, *Power* 246), an important figure for comparative literature not least because Conrad wrote in English as his *third* language (after Polish and French) and because his fiction played out a predicament of exile alongside a capacity for global mobility. Emily Apter has traced the current interest in world literature back through Said to the German-Jewish philologist Erich Auerbach—whom Said had praised in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983) as a key secular literary intellectual—and the Austrian-Jewish philologist Leo Spitzer. Both academics had fled their countries, going into exile initially to work in Istanbul and then to emigrate to the United States, with Auerbach arriving at Pennsylvania State University (he was Fredric Jameson's PhD supervisor) and Spitzer going to Johns Hopkins. In Istanbul, Auerbach wrote his seminal study *Mimesis* (1946), while Spitzer began his projected magnum opus there, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony*: the title reminding us of philology's (and comparative literature's) emphasis on resemblance amongst diversity, on the things that different language groups and different literatures *share*. For Apter, the University of Istanbul in the 1930s was a real point of origin for comparative literature as we understand it today: 'a site where East-West boundaries were culturally blurry' and a place that—remembering that Spitzer spoke around twenty languages—continually disturbed what she calls 'monolingual complacency' (56, 61). But Apter's own discipline, Translation Studies, has little hold on most English departments today which, as I have noted, remain more or less committed to a monolingual approach to literary texts, taking London, not Istanbul, as their key metropolitan centre and point of departure.

I began this article by thinking about what kind of *petit monde* academic English might be, and about the 'republic of letters' as one way of giving this topic a material history. I now want to conclude by mentioning another recent study of world literature, this time by a Parisian academic: Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (1999; English translation 2004). For Casanova, Goethe's ideal of a *Weltliteratur* as a kind of cosmopolitan literary gathering—much like D'Israeli's view—is unrealistic, because it ignores the pressures of competitive markets: it is too high Augustan, too polite. The fact is that literary circulation is not so much global as transnational, the result of deals done between nations

in relation to which some nations do well and others do badly to the extent of being excluded altogether from the global literary system. Casanova identifies three authorial responses to this predicament. Firstly, some authors might opt to stay at home or return home, investing in their *local* literary system. Second, some authors assimilate into the cosmopolitan logics of world literature and are therefore critical of literary and cultural nationalism, such as Rushdie or V.S. Naipaul. And third, some ‘revolutionary’ authors (and Casanova’s primary example here is Samuel Beckett, on whom she has also written another book, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* [2006]) reject both of these positions and so remain permanently in a state of exile. In doing so, they recover the kind of autonomy that is, for Casanova, the essence of literature. As Christopher Prendergast puts it, this third group of authors is heroic for Casanova because ‘in besieging the citadels of the literary imperium, they succeed in conquering not only for themselves but also for the institution of literature a certain ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’; literature not only becomes fully international (as distinct from inter-national), it also becomes ‘literature’, a practice finally freed from its subjection to national imperatives’ (10). We see values that are historically familiar to the republic of letters being championed once again here: in particular, some kind of autonomy from the pressures of cultural nationalism. Now, although we can debate just how ‘revolutionary’ this might be, academic English for better or worse also partakes of this kind of autonomy, and continues to do so; even in Australia, where the pressures of cultural nationalism are apparent to us every time we fill in the National Benefit section of our ARC applications, or on the few occasions a federal minister endows a Chair in Australian Literature and asks English departments around the country to bid for it.

It is true that literature has lost much (but by no means all) of its prestige alongside other media and that it jostles for space and relevance in the present-day education system. It is also true that academic English, which has always been politically weak inside universities, has never been more marginal than it is now—even though, its residual monolingualism and monoculturalism notwithstanding, its horizons have never been broader (with Moretti’s notion of ‘world literature’ remaining for the moment, at least, an unrealised ideal). The relative autonomy that English claims for itself is always contingent, of course, and we know that it can hardly be free from the structures of management, the obligations of professionalism and the pressure for results and outcomes—including employment outcomes for our graduate and undergraduate students—that drive the modern university today. A version of the ‘intellectual industriousness’ that Paul Keen had associated with the republic of letters in the 1790s underwrites the discipline of English right now, which needs to be defined by high-quality as well as high-quantity production, much of which will indeed be devoted to pondering the function and definition not only of its

key object, literature, but of English itself. This means it has to remain inward-looking and disinterested, at least to a degree, as it continues to advocate the virtues of close reading and literary scholarship; while, as it grapples with the emergent problems of distant reading, it also reactivates the older republic of letters' dispersed, cosmopolitan ideals. The relative autonomy it claims for itself also, I think, lends English a special capacity to be *critical*: which is why I still see it, in spite of everything, as a progressive discipline, at least in principle. This gives us precisely one of the contradictions of English: that the ill-fitting qualities of disinterestedness and critical capacity inhabit the same domain, pulling at each other in such a way that neither of these things can ever realise their full potential (which is why, like literature itself, it can never be 'revolutionary'). The relative autonomy of English both enables its critical capacity and severely limits or reduces its effect; along the way, the discipline's prestige becomes indistinguishable from its marginality. At least this means that English, as it constantly reassesses its place in the world, is rarely hagiographic, which is why some work in Biographical Studies, as well as the kind of writing we see from Harold Bloom and conservative literary critics and reviewers in praise of literary genius and so on, can be something of an embarrassment to it: since this kind of work hopelessly over-invests in autonomy for its own sake. Perhaps English today should offer up just two cheers for autonomy, which has always been something of a mixed blessing. In the process, it could also remind itself that its fate relies on the forging of larger communities of scholars and readers much in the tradition of those older republic of letters, whether we think of this in terms of the sharing of specialised interests among an audience of peers or, more fashionably these days, national and global networks of collaborative research.

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