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CRISIS IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

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What happens in British education is of concern to those teaching in South Africa, since so many of the methods used there are adapted by our local authorities - not always with the happiest results. What is happening in Britain? In recent years there has been considerable debate regarding the aims of and approaches to the humanities in general and English studies in particular; this debate has been conducted at university and school level and still continues. Graham Hough, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* for March 17, 1963, showed an early awareness of the issues involved. He argued that there is not one crisis in the importance a technological society places on making things travel faster or explode. The humanities offer no progress in either of these directions and the validity of their study is seriously questioned:

> So that the untechnical studies, of which literature is perhaps the chief, tend to lose influence and prestige and to be pushed aside in the general scramble.
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> The humanities don't claim to alter the conditions of our life, they claim to enhance the quality of the life we already have. The second, far deeper crisis is that we are beginning to doubt whether this claim is true.
>
> ('Crisis in Literary Education', p. 26)

It is argued that literary education will enrich the imagination and bring a greater awareness of the infinite variety and possibilities of human life. But with the emphasis that is placed, especially at university level, on structures of a text and

linguistic exegesis, can it be said that these humanitarian objectives are being realised? Hough is doubtful:

> The trouble with English studies is that they have become too isolated, too purely literary; and purely literary studies are apt to demand either too little or too much. Literary scholarship and original critical insight are not affairs for everyone or even for many: they are a matter of special taste and talent and usually of maturity as well. To base the whole higher education of any large number of people on literary studies alone can only lead to frustration and disappointment.
>
> *(Ibid.)*

In order to accommodate specialist critical and more general cultural interests in English studies, Hough suggested inter-disciplinary work at the graduate schools. The objective would then be the formation of a 'personality ideal' more in line with the liberalism of modern society. Inter-disciplinary work has been a feature of English studies at the redbrick universities of, *inter alia*, Sussex and Essex in recent years. The resultant administrative, organizational, and staffing problems have been overwhelming.

In principle, the attempt to create opportunities for the full development and expression of a student's personality in classroom or lecture hall is admirable; in practice, it may too easily lead to a *laissez-faire* individualism acknowledging neither authority nor obligations. Such individualism often extends to the teachers themselves. The radical innovations associated with the 'self-learning' and 'discovery' methods in British schools and colleges of education are illustrative of the personality cult run wild.

A glance at the well-known Black Papers on education that C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson edited during 1969 will indicate the extremism that threatens the study of the humanities. The editors commented on the aims of a prominent figure in this field of education:

> In *Who Are the Progressives Now?* (1969), Maurice Ash, a leading progressivist, tells us how in primary schools the battle for progressivism, if far from won, is at best fully engaged. Progressivists, he says, must 'push back the frontiers of society's intrusion upon the person'. It is made clear that society's 'intrusion' consists not only in rules and discipline, which are seen as a simple denial of freedom, but in learning and instruction themselves. Ash

> and his fellow contributors condemn streaming, selection, marks, examinations, anything which could ensure that children learn actual subjects or that they are competitively tested at any stage.
>
> ('The Crisis in Education', p. 11)

In due time, many of the products of a pupil-orientated educational system find their way to universities and colleges of education. The sort of training they are likely to receive there is set out in a recent publication, *Experiments in English Teaching* (1976), edited by David Craig and Margot Heinemann. The writers of the various articles in this book have one thing in common: they see education as a form of social engineering that will produce politically-motivated students and teachers. The emphasis is on working-class or proletarian ideals and on the achievement of these ideals by rebellion against middle-class traditions.

Margot Heinemann, who teaches English at the University of London Goldsmiths' College, argues the case for accepting working-class speech in school learning:

> Of course children who get little chance of conversation with adults (for instance, those 'minded' in cramped surroundings from an early age while mothers have to work) suffer in their speech and school learning, as in so many other ways. And all children need to enlarge and develop their language in school. But we're critical of approaches which present working-class language merely as a barrier to understanding and developing general ideas - where, after all, do the articulate miners and dockworkers and Upper Clyde shipbuilders come from?
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> ('Degree into Teaching', p. 47)

Much the same insistence on allowing working-class language to compete with Standard English occurs in the article 'Adult Education and Working-Class Culture' by Bill Parkinson, who lectures in the Department of Adult Education at the University of Keele. His students were insulted by the 'Goodnight Sweet Ladies' passage from *The Waste Land*; they felt (with the approval of Parkinson) that their own language was a natural and efficient tool for communicating their experiences.

Traditional methods of education such as 'rote learning' and instruction are heavily censured by contributors to *Experiments in English Teaching*. And not only the methods but the whole philosophy of education is under attack. One contributor regards

organized education in Britain over the last two hundred years as being purposefully designed to degrade the working class into so much cannon fodder. Quoting from G.A.N. Lowndes' *The Silent Social Revolution*, he writes:

> Thirty to forty years of compulsory education had transformed the 'wild lot gathered in the Willow Alley shed' (Lowndes, p. 16) into the group of disciplined sheep, shown, in the last image of Joan Littlewood's *Oh What a Lovely War*, marching bleating towards the slaughter. Their modern counterparts are to be found in those small communities who live for weeks on end in nuclear-powered submarines... reading comics, pornography, playing cards, and watching movies.
>
> (Albert Hunt: 'Learning Through Theatre', p. 105)

An educational system that can produce this kind of inspired rhetoric cannot be all that ineffectual.

The progressive methods used at these higher centres of learning involve a great deal of informal discussion that verges on group therapy. Students are invited to analyse the problems they have as members of the underprivileged and the ways and means by which society can be altered to their better advantage. For pupil-teachers in particular, the Kay-Shuttleworth directive of 1846 to the founders of British training colleges seems to have faded from view: the qualifications of candidates at these colleges had to include the ability

> to read with fluency, ease and expression; to write in a neat hand with correct spelling and pronunciation, a simple prose narrative slowly read to them.

The prose narratives debated by the new student-proletariat make interesting reading. Nigel Gray of Liverpool University, for example, conducts a course in twentieth-century literature; he discards *Ulysses*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Waves*, and *Murder in the Cathedral*. They lack the necessary emphasis on social protest. In their place he puts *Slaughterhouse 5*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Kes*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. The works of Marx and Engels, Booth and Seabrook, feature prominently in the curricula of English courses offered at the eighteen or so training colleges, polytechnics, and universities mentioned in *Experiments in English Teaching*.

The doubts about the validity of English studies that Graham Hough voiced in 1963 have been reiterated with an even greater sense of urgency by George Watson in the *Times Literary Supplement* for

February 25, 1977. Watson points out that graduate schools of English in Britain have been in decline throughout the 1970s:

> The most immediate cause has been the drop in academic posts, for which they are supposed to be a preparative. Another and more penetrating cause is a wide-spread cynicism concerning their object and deeper purpose. Since numbers are falling and will continue to fall, there can be no point now in proposing a reduction in numbers. The more speculative debate has already moved beyond that point, which has been overtaken by events themselves. It now asks whether our universities have sufficient ground for maintaining English graduate schools at all.
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> ('Literary Research: Thoughts for an Agenda', p. 214)

The cynicism of which Watson speaks has largely resulted from a conviction, bred of recent critical theory, that 'literature can neither inform nor instruct about anything, and that criticism cannot inform or instruct about literature' (*Ibid.*). The study of literature has become one of form and structure *per se*; considerations of humanistic or ideological values are excluded as irrelevant. There are, so the argument of many university lecturers runs, no absolute values and relative values involve beliefs and not certainties. The one certainty is the arrangement of the words on the printed page and this arrangement is what remains to be studied. The claim of scientific objectivity that is often made in support of such a dehumanised approach to literature is, as Watson points out, symptomatic of the malaise from which our society suffers:

> We are afraid of belief. Having burnt our fingers on belief, in the 1960s, it is natural that many should take refuge in a conceptual agnosticism and intoxicate themselves in the contemplation of comparative methodologies. But if the modern critic were asked what he was doing and why he was doing it, would he have an answer?
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> (*Ibid.*)

The consequences of either using the teaching of English for socio-political ends or in divorcing such teaching from the value-judgements that give it meaning are clearly disastrous. From the evidence of what is happening in Britain today, and what could easily happen in South Africa tomorrow, there is every reason to fear that English studies will eventually find no place in higher education.