The Social Production of Knowledge and the Discipline of English

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Capitalism posits the infinite as that which is not yet determined, as that which the will must indefinitely master and appropriate. The infinite bears the names of cosmos, energy, and research and development.

Jean-François Lyotard

I

All speech is constrained by its occasion and by the genre within which it is framed. I speak tonight in the highly formalized genre of the inaugural lecture—a ceremonial genre that opens certain possibilities of speech to me, and that endows my words with a certain, perhaps illusory, institutional resonance. The person who speaks in this genre speaks not only as an individual but, in a sense, as a representative of their discipline, commenting on its past and its present structure, predicting or arguing for its future development, and describing the conditions necessary for its success. The word 'inaugural' derives from the priestly profession of augur, and specifically from the Latin word inaugurare, which means either 'to take omens from the flight of birds, the entrails of sacrificial victims, and other phenomena', or 'to consecrate or install after taking such omens or auguries'. This talk is a part of an investiture, then; but I shall also take up the invitation to prophecy, and to the examination of the entrails of one or two, sacrificial victims.
The context within which I want to situate my reflections on the
discipline of English — or, more broadly, the discipline of literary
studies — is that of the changing functions and status of knowledge over
the last century. It is now perhaps a commonplace to observe that
knowledge has become one of the major productive resources of
advanced capitalism, but the full dimensions and implications of this
change are only beginning to be adequately theorized.

Some of the most interesting work in this area is that of the
American economist Fritz Machlup, who began writing about the
economics of knowledge production nearly forty years ago; to his
various books should be added the nine-volume report compiled by
Marc Uri Porat for the US Department of Commerce in 1977. The
two bodies of work use somewhat different accounting methods. The
strength of Machlup’s procedure is that by refusing qualitative dis-
nerations between different kinds of knowledge he is able to get at
the full extent of what might be counted and costed as knowledge in a
modern economy — and can thereby get at real qualitative shifts in the
structure of capital and the structure of social class.

Machlup divides the knowledge industry into five categories: educa-
tion; research and development; media of communication; information
machines; and information services. In all of these areas he identifies a
massive increase in outputs during the course of the century, and an
increase in the contribution of the knowledge industry to GNP. Total
knowledge production in 1958 was almost 29 per cent of GNP, rising
to 36.5 per cent in 1980. Porat’s figures are even higher: he classifies
46 per cent of GNP as information activity, and 53 per cent of all
income as earned by information workers.

Machlup identifies significant shifts in the composition of the
workforce. Between 1900 and 1980 the category of manual and service
workers remained roughly constant; farm labour declined dramatically
from 37.5 per cent to 2.8 per cent; and white-collar work rose steadily
from 17.6 per cent to 52.2 per cent. In general: ‘The changing
employment pattern indicates a continuing movement from manual to
mental, and from less to more highly trained labour.’

In the last twenty or thirty years the patterns that Machlup and
Porat describe have been intensified, to such an extent that the new
technologies of information storage and retrieval are now commonly
seen as initiating a distinctive phase of the industrial revolution. But
the important shift is not primarily technological. It has to do with the
integration of knowledge into capitalist production, and in particular
with the fact that knowledge has itself become a key commodity. This
is to say that knowledge has moved from being primarily a use-value to
being primarily an exchange-value; it is measured by commercial ends
rather than by an end internal to knowledge itself.

In *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, which was
commissioned by the Quebec University Council and which should be
required reading for all educationists and educational administrators, the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard attempts to spell out some of the consequences of the changed status of knowledge in the modern (or postmodern) world. He details some of the ways in which the ends of research are subordinated to a principle of efficiency or 'performativity', and argues that research is now ultimately validated by its ability to contribute, in a circle of mutual legitimation, to the augmentation of power. The universities are central to this industrial machinery; they are the key site for the production of new knowledge and for the supply of personnel for the system, and they are crucially caught up in the contradictions of knowledge production.

One important indication of the way the production of knowledge in the universities is now directly geared to functional criteria is the Australian system of national research priorities. Another is the increasing importance of the concept of intellectual property: that is, of private property in ideas. In Australian law this takes three forms: copyright protection, patent protection, and protection of trademarks. Patents protect ideas themselves, but the burden of proof of originality is extremely rigorous. Copyright doctrine, by contrast, seeks to distinguish between substantive ideas, which are free and can be freely appropriated, and the form of expression of ideas, which is all that can be legally protected. But the distinction is almost impossible to maintain with any philosophical rigour, since the expression is never external to the expressed idea, and an idea is defined precisely by its form of expression. Recent attempts to extend copyright protection to computer software have pushed this metaphysics of form and content to the point of absurdity.

Australian universities are increasingly being driven towards a conflict between the idea that research should be published in freely circulating scholarly journals, and the need to protect commercially valuable information. The conflict becomes more acute at a time when universities are being urged to find supplementary private sources of income. To their credit, most of the established universities seem so far to have resisted the pressures towards the privatization of knowledge, but many of the former CAEs are now openly expounding the legitimacy of so-called 'contractual research', the results of which are transmitted to the contracting corporation rather than finding their way to open publication.

Knowledge is a multiplier of labour-power, and is itself stored labour, but it is not, as many contemporary beliefs about technology would have it, itself a source of value. It enters the production process as indirect labour, and it contributes to production in one of two ways: directly, as technology or as skill or as the supervision and control of labour; and indirectly, as part of the social infrastructure that makes production possible. Medicine, law, education, the state bureaucracy and the military and police forces are all examples of such an indirect
contribution. All have changed substantially in the course of the century, in part as a consequence of the explosion of new knowledges, especially in the sciences, and their integration into commodity production, but in part also because of changes in the social organization of knowledge. In particular, all have undergone a process of professionalization.

By professionalization I mean a complex of processes including, first, the consolidation and closure of a body of knowledge within clearly demarcated disciplinary boundaries, and an internal differentiation of this body of knowledge into discrete but interrelated parts; second, the more efficient production and transmission, but also the more efficient monopolization, of this knowledge by a definite group; third, a stratification of this group, as a result of which those at the top of the hierarchy are endowed with the authority to control group membership by the administration of credentials and of sanctions; and fourth, a clearly defined relationship between that knowledge which can be publicly displayed as part of a claim to expertise and remuneration, and the 'mystery' or craft secret that forms the basis for the closure of the professional group against the uninitiated. Specialized languages or jargons may be an important part of the elaboration of the mystery, as may ceremonies such as the inaugural lecture.

Here too the universities play a central role, as the suppliers of credentials to the professions, and especially as the place where newly emergent professions can make the claim to credentialization. Professionalism has also deeply affected the organization of disciplines within the university, and the organization of university government. I shall have more to say about this later.

II

Let me summarize my argument to this point by saying that in our century there have been two major dimensions to the change in the status of knowledge: on the one hand, knowledge has increasingly become a commodity, with commercial value; on the other hand, the distribution and transmission of knowledge have increasingly been organized in accordance with the requirements of professional control and demarcation.

Both of these processes have tended to generate a dominant understanding of knowledge in terms of what Weber and Habermas call 'instrumental rationality' (zweckmässige Vernunft) – a conception of knowledge as a technical instrument applied to predetermined ends that are not themselves a proper object of knowledge, and are therefore not to be critically analysed. Such a technocratic vision serves the interests of those who have the power to control knowledge, either by producing it or by buying it, and it is profoundly anti-democratic in its implications.
It is also profoundly at odds with the vision of knowledge that informs the constitution of the modern Western university. This vision has as its foundation the belief that the pursuit of knowledge is valuable for its own sake, and that pure research should thus have precedence over applied research – the latter being a kind of contingent spin-off. The first of two corollaries to this belief is that knowledge is understood to be, in its essence, disinterested: its goals are set by the internal evolution of the discipline, in abstraction from social needs or pressures and from the needs of any sectional group. The second corollary is that knowledge is understood to be, in its essence, critical: its one imperative is to undermine both internal obstacles to the quest for truth, in the form of a priori assumptions, and external obstacles, in the form of social prejudice. In pedagogic terms it corresponds to the requirements of what Schiller, in his inaugural lecture at Jena, called Bildung, a general moral and intellectual formation, as opposed to Ausbildung, a more narrowly vocational training.\(^9\)

This is an Enlightenment vision of the role of knowledge, and in some ways it has worn rather badly. It no longer bears much relation to the values actually attached to knowledge in Australian universities, where applied research or research serving governmental or corporate interests is by and large much better rewarded than pure or basic research, and where the course of study is increasingly directed to vocational training. And it is naïve, even dangerously naïve, in its assumption that social interest is external to knowledge. The goals of research are always determined by some vision of the social good or of some narrower interest; and knowledge, which is always of potential use, is therefore always in a relation to power. It need not be directly political, but it is always indirectly so.

The lack of fit between the lip-service paid to the value of disinterested, critical research, and its actual irrelevance in terms of funding and prestige, has produced a strong sense of marginalization on the part of the disciplines that remain committed to the traditional model. I shall speak here only of the humanities, although the malaise is more widespread.

The problem is most deeply that of the possible place of critical thought in a capitalist society – that is, in a society that seeks to harness knowledge more or less directly to the generation of profit. Whereas once we could envisage spaces of exception to the logic of capital accumulation, these ethical and aesthetic spaces are now disappearing in the face of a more totalizing rationality. One indication of this is the way in which, in the discourses both of the New Right and of their near cousins the technocratic left, an economic vocabulary is used to discredit the study of the humanities. The most forceful attacks have taken place in recent years in the United States, taking the apparently paradoxical form of a demand for a more important role for the humanities.\(^10\) But this call for the humanities to return to the
affirmative teaching of a supposed consensual culture, a set of common truths and universal values, in fact summons them to an essentially decorative role, a support role in the business of national economic reconstruction: their concern is to be with the things of the spirit while the real work of the world goes on elsewhere. In Australia and Britain the attack on the humanities has been less public, more a matter of budgetary decisions than of reasoned argument, but its core has been a narrowly monetarist questioning of the benefits of a general education. It is impossible to counter this attack by appealing to the ethical or civic value of literary study, since it is precisely the value of these values that is in question; and yet this has been the standard response.

Those who rise to the defence of the humanities have in this sense often been their own worst enemy. They have appealed to certain stable and unproblematic values, as though these had not been the object of an intensive critique within the humanities themselves. Assuming the existence of a common culture and a common humanity, they have ignored the unequal distribution of power and the radically diverse cultural systems that these terms have concealed. They have posited the possibility of a disinterested reason, as though reason had no complicity in the play of interest and power that organizes the world. They have worked with an essentialist distinction between the humanities and the sciences, rather than noticing the core of criticality and creativity that they share. Most crucially, they have set up the world of culture as a distinct and self-contained domain, separate from the world of work and power and without effects upon it. In so doing, the humanities’ defenders have robbed the study of culture of all its critical force, all its ability to intervene in the discursive structures that are the medium of work and power. They have perhaps despaired of any serious role for the study of textuality, and have taken comfort in being misunderstood.

I suggest, by contrast, that the value of the so-called humanities, and more specifically of the disciplines of literary studies, can be defended only by taking to its radical conclusions the critique of the essentialist and foundational categories that have governed the humanities’ formation. This sets us the more difficult task of elaborating theoretical categories and practices of reading that do not essentialize the domain of literature or of culture; which can account for social and cultural difference and inequality of power on a number of dimensions; which refuse to give specific aesthetic or ethical values an absolute status (and which thereby relativize and situate their own position); and which can develop a new understanding of the ends of textual study.

The discipline of English in Australia, which is now little more than a century old, was formed in a context of political and cultural colonialism, and of the teaching of a high culture that was specifically that of the English ruling class. From its mid-nineteenth century
inception it has made large claims both to ethical superiority and to a disinterested neutrality in relation to social struggles. It has claimed to be a critical discipline, but its critique has often been of a purely spiritual order. It has until recently been blind to the ways in which the high culture it disseminates has worked as an instrument of class legitimation. Until recently it has systematically slighted — with certain honorary exceptions — the work of women and of non-European writers, and indeed has hardly noticed the paradox of the self-disqualification this entails. Despite its close connection with the secondary schooling system it has rarely taken seriously the realities of its roles in ethical regulation and in the training of students in functional literacy — indeed, it has been associated with a rigidly normative teaching of language skills that may explain much of the unfortunate revulsion against grammatical training in the schools. As Colin MacCabe writes,

The impossibility of splitting the English infinitive, the necessity of using It is I rather than It's me, the rules for the future which sorted will and shall into their paradigms, all these and many more were rules invented both to make our language conform with a universal reason perceived in the structures of Latin, and, more importantly, to divide the nation into those who could speak their own language and those who could not.

Fortunately, the discipline has been falling apart for some time now. Let me briefly describe what I see as four key moments of change.

The first involved the questioning of the implications of the name 'English', and it was closely tied to the push for the teaching of Australian literature. This movement has largely been successful, and 'English' now covers all writings in the English language, with no necessary privilege given to the writings of England. This has meant a strong development of interest both in the construction of a national canon and in the category of the postcolonial, which brings together a number of non-English literatures; but beyond this there is an increasing recognition that, at a time when virtually all other literatures have become accessible in translation, even the English language no longer constitutes a natural or inevitable border. There is no good reason why the discipline of English should not eventually become equivalent simply to literary studies, and forge a much closer co-operation with the other language departments; indeed, there are good theoretical reasons why the comparative perspective this would entail should be given a central place in the discipline.

The second major impetus to change came from the feminist critique of the gendered construction of the literary canon — that is, of its domination by men, and usually white middle-class men. The force of this critique spurred parallel moves among other groups excluded from representation in the canon, and generated an important process of
revision. But it also widened out to pose a number of more general questions about the construction of difference: questions about the gendered nature of reading, about the differential formation of the self and of personal experience, and about the institutional determinants of social and cultural inequality. At the most general level, then, feminism forced onto the agenda a politics of cultural action that undermined many of the available political pieties.

The third movement for change came from the newly developing discipline of cultural studies, and involved the broadening of English to include the study of non-canonical literary genres, and of non-literary forms, especially film and, somewhat later, television. This movement (which has had less impact in the United Kingdom and has hardly begun in literature departments in the United States) has had varied effects in Australian departments of English. In some instances cultural studies (or communication studies) has been split off into a separate department or programme, thus preserving an unfortunate division of labour. In many newer institutions where there is no department of English or even of literature, communication studies is often taught with an uncritically vocational emphasis. Where there is an integration of English with cultural studies, however, the discipline of English is further broadened to encompass the study of textuality in the widest sense.

The fourth key movement is the development of what is loosely known as ‘theory’ — that is, the more or less systematic interrogation of the basic categories and methodologies with which literary study is undertaken. The sophistication of this movement, to which much of my own work belongs, is closely bound up with the professionalization of the discipline and the concomitant importance of acquiring credentials; in so far as this is the case, it is of mixed value. Its influence has been baleful to the extent that it has become a routine set of tricks or an empty (because ultimately uncritical) phraseology. This has frequently been the case, I think, with American deconstruction. On the other hand, the recent flourishing of literary theory has been immensely valuable and exciting when it has been a way of opening up literary study to the influence of other disciplines — that is, when it actively works, as at its best it tends to do, to break down the autonomy and the constricting closure of the discipline.

The result of these changes has been a productively conflictual chaos. English is no longer, if it ever was, a coherent and well-mapped structure, but is rather a loose collocation of disciplines and areas, each opening on to the other. The English Department at the University of Queensland is perhaps exemplary in this respect: within its general umbrella it includes English, Australian and American literature, Black Australian literature, the study of postcolonial literatures and medieval European literatures, drama, linguistics, communication and cultural studies, women’s studies and literary theory — to name a few.
The price paid for this diversity is a certain amorphousness and a loss of conceptual specificity, as well as a certain laissez-faire tolerance that can easily entail an uncritical pluralism. The lack of a single ‘correct’ methodology does not mean a lack of precision or of insight, however; on the contrary, literary study seems to me to be in a state of healthy turmoil. It has, moreover, increasingly exerted an influence beyond its own boundaries. Jonathan Culler puts it this way:

On the one hand, literary studies has become an exporter of theoretical discourse, as other disciplines – law, anthropology, art history, even psychoanalysis – have taken note of developments in what literary critics call ‘theory’ and have turned to it for stimulation. On the other hand, literary critics themselves, grown confident and sophisticated from their interdisciplinary encounters, have increasingly turned to writing about phenomena that fall outside the boundaries of traditional literary study

– turned to such things as philosophical texts, or ‘new historical objects or discourses – the body, the discourse of imperialism, psychoanalysis, principles of legal interpretation, popular culture’. And Culler adds that ‘if there is a unity to literary studies in this new dispensation it comes not from the canon of plays, poems and novels but from an attention to mechanisms of signification which can be studied in a wide range of texts and text-like situations’.\(^\text{13}\)

The scope of the discipline of English has thus become more like that of a generalized rhetoric, or a general field of textual studies (where ‘textual’ must be taken to include the conditions of existence and of circulation of textuality). It is no longer restricted to the study of high culture and to apparently universal aesthetic values, since, as Anne Freadman puts it, ‘the study of culture, its traditions and its current practices, is not confined to the celebration of those parts of the entertainment industry that count as highbrow’.\(^\text{14}\) Rather, in the context of an ever more powerful instrumental rationality tied to a narrow conception of efficiency, its task has changed from affirmation to that of constituting an adversary force, undermining rather than forming a common culture, and attempting to disrupt the settled representations by means of which power is legitimated.

### III

In this final section I want to say a few words about the various levels of institutional struggle in which the discipline of English is engaged. The most general level is that of government policy, which affects all disciplines in the university but which has specific effects on the humanities disciplines.

The unwelcome continuance of John Dawkins in the Employment, Education and Training portfolio will mean the perpetuation of a
deeply flawed policy that is structured round a central contradiction: namely, that the government desires to build a knowledge-based economy, but does not value learning. What it values instead is training, which involves the application of existing knowledges. Learning, by contrast, involves the critical transformation of existing knowledges; it involves uncertainty and doubt, and the impossibility of predictable outcomes.

Clearly, skills formation is valuable in its own right, and the government is correct to pursue the reskilling of the workforce as a primary objective. The problem lies only in its attempt to superimpose the model of training on a system of learning. The effect of its instrumentalist view of knowledge has been to favour the production of applied knowledges, and to devalue those knowledges which do not contribute directly to Gross National Product. The White Paper paid lip service to the importance of the humanities, but the only example it singled out was the teaching of Asian languages, and that only because of the contribution it could make to trade relations. The reality is that money has been diverted from the humanities and the social sciences, and from basic undergraduate teaching, and channelled into areas of research defined in terms of government-set priorities.

Despite the overall expansion of tertiary education, and despite the government’s claim to be funding the universities more generously, departments such as mine are hurting badly. At a time when we are teaching classes of up to 500 students, with tutorial groups averaging around 25 students, and with staff burdened by an ever-increasing workload, we are actually shedding jobs, and shedding even our graduate tutorial assistants. Junior staff on contracts, struggling to put a career together, have been badly damaged, and the morale of staff is generally poor. With around 95 per cent of our funding tied up in salaries, we lack the money to provide some of the most basic forms of research support.

One further dimension of this problem is that the government has failed to put its money where its mouth is by giving a much higher value to the profession of teaching. The paucity of teachers’ salaries is primarily the responsibility of the States, but there is no doubt that the Federal Government could, if it tried, radically revalue this despised profession. The contempt in which it is currently held, as evidenced by its salary levels, has direct effects on generalist departments in the humanities and the social sciences, and indeed on many of the natural sciences.

A final matter of considerable concern in the area of government policy is the attempt to replace a collegial system of university governance by a model of corporate management. This model underlies a range of attempts to restructure the work conditions of academics, who are, as Anna Yeatman suggests, under increasing pressure to become ‘a technical intelligentsia servicing the research requirements
of industry and the state'. Yet it is arguable that the system of collegial governance, and the peer review on which it was based, was a working model of industrial democracy, for all its faults (these were real, and included the fact that it applied only to staff with tenure, that it had no adequate sanctions to deal with inefficient colleagues, and that it was open to abuse in a relatively small academic community such as Australia's). And it is precisely this that was threatening to a Labor Party minister. Mark Considine, in a paper that gives a very interesting analysis of the management model, cites the Green Paper on Higher Education to this effect: 'Criticizing the occasional academic practice of electing deans and some other heads of management units, the Minister makes it clear that corporate management and organizational democracy do not mix: "it is difficult to justify election among colleague academics as an acceptable system", the paper says.'

Labor's 'reforms' in higher education have been flatly anti-democratic, and they reflect the more general poverty of Labor's political programme. Gullibly fascinated with the culture of business, lacking any but the most narrowly economic vision of change, the ALP has failed to articulate an alternative to the rule of capital. And yet it has never been more necessary to develop a vision of a society where the principles of political democracy would be extended to the economic realm.

The second level of institutional struggle that I want to talk about concerns the relations between the disciplines, and in particular between different models of research. The crux of the problem is this; analytic work in the humanities tends to be rather different from the forms of research undertaken in other disciplines; but the paradigm of research that dominates the universities is taken from the sciences. It supposes that research is concerned with the analysis of a domain of factuality, whether the data be archival or experimentally established. It supposes that the research problem arises as a necessary stage in the evolution of the discipline, and that a definite set of clearly demarcated research problems is available to researchers. It supposes that the research problem is relatively impersonal, and that analysis can if necessary be delegated to other researchers. And it supposes that interpretation and valuation are secondary or even illegitimate procedures.

Much work in the humanities does indeed conform to this model, but much of it does not. The very concept of 'research' is barely relevant to those forms of work which have to do, not with a body of factual data but with the critical analysis of structures of value and meaning. This work can be rigorous and it can produce genuine insights; it can, at its very best, have a profound influence upon the knowledges produced in other disciplines. But it does not fit easily into the game of research. Very often — and I suspect that this is true too of much work in mathematics and pure science — it is work that cannot be delegated because it has no content of routine investigation. Often it cannot be planned in advance, because it depends on a movement 'from
curiosity into interest, then into involvement, then into introspection about the whole matter, and only then into formulating the method of inquiry and perhaps even the true topic of inquiry. This means that such work is often simply not appropriate for research grants in their present form; yet the failure to attract grants is treated as an indication of poor research performance rather than of the irrelevance of research grants to much genuinely rigorous work in the humanities. The needs of most humanities scholars are for time and for library facilities, both of which largely fall outside the guidelines for ARC funding (the exceptions are token). And yet Simon During is surely right to argue that ‘it is up to those who administer an increasing proportion of the research funds to provide packages that suit the disciplines and individual researchers who are their clients. If time is what scholars need for strong projects, then time is what they should be given.’

The third level at which I want to talk about institutional struggle has to do with the particular mechanisms by which it might be possible to reinforce the centrality of critical learning to the university. Here I must, of necessity, return to the augural role that I forecast at the beginning of my lecture, in order to sketch out a few modest proposals.

The first of these concerns the time-frame within which we think of tertiary education. Currently it is restricted to a brief intensive period—a scant three years of undergraduate study, followed by a few more years of optional graduate study. If the expansion of the tertiary system were not to be purely a matter of training but had to do as well with cultural and intellectual enrichment, then it would be necessary to extend it along the life-span. The Labor Party once spoke enthusiastically of education for life, but the concept has now become a dead letter, especially since the introduction of the HECS fee. It’s time to revive it.

The second proposal concerns the relationship between undergraduate and postgraduate study in Australian universities. My suggestion is that it is time for us to start thinking about professional training as being properly located in a postgraduate degree—and I note with pleasure that a similar suggestion is currently being mooted for the University of Queensland in relation to medical training. Such a move, which would view the undergraduate degree as a general pre-professional education, would have the direct educational benefit of selecting entrants to the professions more fairly and with much greater validity. It would also have the payoff of moving away from a narrow specialization towards a broadly based critical and problem-solving intelligence—and this holds true for generalist undergraduate degrees in the sciences and social sciences as much as in the humanities.

Both of these suggestions have funding implications and are therefore highly problematic. The final two do not. The first of these is in part a warning: that if English departments, in the universities as much as in the schools, are not to lose credibility, they must respond
meaningfully to the strong public pressure over the perceived decline in standards of literacy. We have tended not to do so, partly because we are suspicious of the evidence for this decline, partly because we are rightly distrustful of the normative teaching of grammar and usage. But the answer is not to withdraw but to devise better, more flexible, more class-specific and gender-specific and situation-specific models of usage. We might think, for example, as Jay Lemke has recently proposed, of teaching standard English as though it were a foreign language. All of this means, I think, that we must develop a much broader and less mechanical conception of literacy, and that we should start valuing the teaching of composition and writing skills much more than we now do.

My final suggestion concerns the internal organization of an English department, and I broach it here only because I believe it has wider implications. Gerald Graff has argued that the organization of a department into genres, periods and so on is itself a form of implicit theory. It corresponds to a structure of professional specialization, and it has the effect of obviating the need for continuing collective discussion of categories and principles. Theory itself can then be ghettoized as one more option among others. His proposal is that, if the relations between texts and between interpretive methods are to be a major object of questioning, then they too need to be given an institutional form; and he therefore recommends that ‘in relation to other courses in the department, theory courses should be central, not peripheral; their function should be to contextualize and pull together the students’ work in other courses (outside as well as inside the literature department). Wherever possible, therefore, they should be required courses rather than electives.’

The point of this is not to plead a special case for a preferred area of study but to stress that it is theory that carries the central burden of criticality in the teaching of literary studies, and that critique is the dynamic core of any discipline. Its task is destructive and it lacks all compassion, for only through destruction is new knowledge possible. Critique is that ‘monstrous power of the negative, the energy of thought’ that Hegel described when he wrote: ‘But not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself pure of devastation, but the life that endures death and preserves itself through it is the life of the spirit’. Although tonight I wear these priestly robes, derived from the ancient priestly functions of the University, my task is not priestly. Critical knowledge is subversive of every orthodoxy and of every dogmatism. It cares nothing for established orders; it is relentless in its rejection of established certainties, beginning with its own. It is not by any means an unmitigated good, but without it the very idea of the University becomes untenable.
NOTES


4 Machlup, p. 382; Rubin and Huber, p. 195.

5 Machlup, pp. 396–7.


18 Simon During, 'The Humanities and Research Funding', Arena 90 (1990), pp. 31–2.
20 Ibid., p. 250.