Introduction

Put briefly, the subject of this book is what has recently been termed the ‘crisis in English’,¹ put less polemically, it is concerned with the current state (and status) of English studies in higher education. The topic is of course not new; indeed, it has produced a veritable corpus of essays, books and lectures on both sides of the Atlantic. Although the particular forms of these debates have been different in Britain and the United States, they nevertheless have many issues in common. In our opening chapters we discuss some of the local differences between Britain and America, but our main interest lies in addressing the ground common to both countries – in short, the issue of value and politics in English studies. In most accounts of English a simple but important fact has frequently been overlooked: that within higher education the study of English constitutes a discipline of knowledge. The contribution of the present book to the controversy over English lies in its attempt to locate that controversy within the context of disciplinary knowledge in general, and this, we maintain, enables us to point out some of the limitations of recent discussions about the nature of the subject. More precisely it makes clear that some of the issues which have been so heatedly debated – particularly those

¹ The term ‘crisis’ occurred regularly during discussions of English studies in the 1980s. Recent use of it has been made by Terry Eagleton, ‘The Enemy Within’, NATE News (Summer 1991), 5; and by Gary Day in a review of Colin MacCabe (ed.), Futures for English (Manchester, 1988) in Textual Practice, 6 (1992), 513–19. Day’s opening remarks are typical of a common attitude towards the alleged crisis: ‘As we all know, English is dead… The age of innocence is past and in its place we have a literature riven by history and unconscious desire, a literature always other to itself, a battle site of and for meaning, not the place where meaning finds its most perfect expression. All this can be taken for granted’ (p. 513).
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cconcerning the ideology or politics of literary criticism – have been fundamentally mischaracterized.

This conviction that English studies should not be viewed as an isolated case has led us to devote several chapters to developing a general thesis about the nature and function of disciplines of knowledge. That thesis makes two large claims. The first has to do with what we argue is the social nature of disciplinary knowledge. Here a central concept in our argument is what we term the ‘mechanisms of intellectual authority’, or the ways in which status is ascribed to particular forms of knowledge. By the term ‘mechanisms of intellectual authority’ we mean the processes by which one or more competing explanations within a discipline of knowledge come to be seen as the dominant ones. Our argument is that the processes whereby one explanatory paradigm achieves prestige or dominance, although socially defined, possess a degree of autonomy. In English studies on both sides of the Atlantic, these very processes now tend to be seen as exclusively political in character – that is, to be attributable to ideology. For example, it is now commonplace to read that the authority of a particular interpretation of a text is based solely upon shared values which are in turn perceived to be political. This assumption makes possible the frequently stated claim that the primary aim of English studies is, in Gerald Graff’s words ‘to become an instrument of social transformation’. It is our argument that in disciplines of knowledge in general, intellectual authority, far from being reducible to politics, is autonomous in the sense that the initial decision to employ certain mechanisms to ascribe status to knowledge, and those mechanisms themselves, although they have a social basis, cannot be collapsed into political issues.

Our second large concern is to outline the philosophical preconditions for the existence of disciplines of knowledge and to distinguish them from any political functions which that knowledge might possess. Here the central concept which we employ is that of a ‘community’: more precisely, we are concerned with the distinction between a sociological or

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political understanding of the term ‘community’ (roughly meaning those agreements which unite particular interest groups) and a philosophical understanding of it – one which refers to the kind of agreement necessary for knowledge to be possible in the first instance. The concepts of ‘community’ and of ‘mechanisms of intellectual authority’ are connected by the problematic issue of value in disciplinary knowledge – the extent to which the existence of value-judgements purportedly compromises the ‘objectivity’, and hence the authority, of that knowledge. Here we argue that in disciplines of knowledge in general the mechanisms of intellectual authority are made possible by the existence of a philosophical – that is, a non-political – community. The question which we then consider is whether this situation can or does obtain in English studies: that is, whether the value-judgements which English allegedly embodies are wholly political in nature; and secondly, whether they are different in this respect from the judgements which operate in other disciplines of knowledge.

Our apparent attempt to minimize the role of politics in the structure of disciplinary knowledge may seem surprising, especially in light of the attention which the influence of politics on academic life has attracted over recent years. In the United States, this influence has been felt in heated arguments, most famously at Stanford University, over the ways in which issues of class, gender and particularly race impinge upon the curriculum (or canon) and upon teaching methods. ‘Political correctness’ is the most public and controversial manifestation of this process, and it is one which is also affecting British university life – at the time of writing Stanford has found its British counterpart in the University of Loughborough. However it is precisely because political controversy has so dominated discussion of the teaching of English that other aspects of disciplinary knowledge – its philosophical conditions and social nature – have been neglected. The consequences of this neglect are documented in our first chapter, where we argue that there is an important and necessary distinction to be made between

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what we term the ‘institutional’ and the ‘intellectual’. The tendency to conflate the latter with the powers of the former has been largely responsible for the recent concentration on politics by critics and theorists. We should, however, emphasize that in making this distinction we are not suggesting that politics has no role to play in disciplines of knowledge (indeed we document these very public political arguments in later chapters). Rather, we argue that understanding the philosophical and sociological issues will change the ways in which we see the role of politics.

The topic in English studies which more than any other focuses the current confusion over the role of politics and value in the discipline is that of ‘theory’, and it is therefore central to our argument. We suggest that the issue of what it means to ‘do’ theory is at the heart of the problems concerning the disciplinary status of English: in particular it raises the questions, what body of knowledge does English teach; and how is that body of knowledge authorized, taught and examined? To identify ‘theory’ as the focal point of the problems in English studies is not of course original. The most famous instance was the polemic of Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels against theory in 1982; but the tradition has survived in anthologies such as Ralph Cohen’s *The Future of Literary Theory* (1989) and Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller’s *Re-Thinking Theory* (1992). However the most familiar way in which the centrality of theory and its attendant problems is encountered is in the daily work of teachers of English – in particular in the pressing question of the problematic relationship between theory and practice. Teachers of English are aware that theory tends to be taught in isolation: today in universities and other institutions of higher education there are often courses on contemporary critical theory – on structuralism, formalism, Marxism, feminism and cultural materialism, for example – which are quite distinct from courses on the material which that theory is supposed to explain – literary periods, author or genre studies, and so on. Indeed a familiar complaint of students is that they cannot connect the so-called theory of reading texts with what they actually do in practice. ‘Doing theory’ is often assumed by them (and is implicit in the structure of the courses taught by
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lecturers) to be an end in itself, and not a theory of a practice. Characteristically, the solutions to this dilemma have often been piecemeal ones; remedies, particularly the provision of ‘readers’ which demonstrate theory ‘at work’, simply perpetuate rather than resolve the problem, for invariably such anthologies fail to engage with the vexed issue of the contemporary multiplicity of theories. It is precisely this multiplicity which, we argue, makes the question of authority problematic. In practical terms students are often no wiser as to which theory is ‘right’, nor are they given the ability to test the ‘rightness’ of a particular theory, nor indeed the ability to understand what theoretical ‘rightness’ might be. Not surprisingly, for most undergraduates in English departments, theory seems a dispensable luxury – one which accompanies but which is quite distinct from their main studies.

Throughout this book we argue that disciplines of knowledge have two main functions. The first is the accumulation and explanation of knowledge about their object of study (or, as this function is usually described, research); the other is the dissemination of that knowledge through teaching (or pedagogy). The role of theory in each of these functions is generally clear. In the former case, theories explain both the object of study and the practices used to investigate it; in the latter, they are part of the knowledge which is disseminated to students. So, to take an ideal if hypothetical example: history undergraduates studying the First World War might be taught the ‘facts’ – materials and sources – which have been used to write a history of it; then they might be taught explanations of the war based on those facts and materials; and finally they would be taught the historiographical principles and values which have allowed historians to identify the facts about that war which they have identified, and which have allowed them to explain it in the ways in which they have explained it. So students in this hypothetical instance would be taught a body of knowledge about the past, and the theory of how that knowledge is produced. In other words, the processes and mechanisms whereby that body of knowledge is authorized, or given status (processes which we have termed the mechanisms of intellectual
authority) are a central part of their studies. Here – certainly in higher education – theory and practice are inseparable, in the sense that the value of particular facts about (or explanations of) the object of study cannot be determined without reference to the particular theory which initially led to those facts being identified (or that explanation being arrived at). However the current teaching or use of theory in English studies is not at all like this hypothetical example. In the first place, theory does not explain the object of study of the discipline. On the contrary, it is often used to problematize it, to the extent that in some cases it threatens to abolish it altogether; proponents of theories such as Marxism or formalism not only disagree about interpretations of particular works, they also disagree about which works should be interpreted. They contest not the relative value of works within a literary canon, but what constitutes that canon, and often whether indeed it should exist at all. (It is precisely these disputes which have formed the basis of the public controversies at institutions such as Stanford and Loughborough.) In the face of these disagreements, logically speaking all that is left to study is ‘theory’ itself. However, without any agreement about what theory is supposed to explain (a canon of works), English studies is left with a set of critical tools, but no clear notion of what to apply them to. It has a means of producing knowledge (by virtue of the fact that it has a variety of contested theoretical paradigms) but paradoxically cannot lay claim to any specific body of knowledge. In this sense, as we shall argue in later chapters, it runs the risk of failing to fulfil the fundamental criteria of a discipline of knowledge, not least of which are those concerning pedagogy. The basic questions here are: what can a discipline which produces no ‘authoritative’ knowledge actually teach; and how can what it claims to teach – a means for producing knowledge – be examined? The paradoxical situation in English studies today is that the introduction of explicit theorizing within the discipline has both produced the current ‘crisis’ and prevented it from being resolved. This paradox is easy to see when present disputes are set in a historical context. In the third chapter we argue that a general epistemological discussion generated in the
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philosophy of science in the 1960s was widened in the 1970s and 1980s to include the role of value-judgements in all disciplinary knowledge. When current debates about English are placed within this context it is possible to see the disagreements among literary theorists in an entirely new light. And in turn this context permits us to ask whether the problems which have been perceived to be the cause of the present ‘crisis’ are in fact real problems at all.

Our discussion of these issues forms what is perhaps the most controversial aspect of this book. We argue that programmes for reform (conceived as a response to a number of political imperatives for the discipline) are flawed, first because they are predicated upon incorrect assumptions about how disciplines of knowledge work, and secondly because they are internally inconsistent. We further suggest that far from ‘saving’ the discipline, such reforms, if pursued rigorously, actually place it in a crisis more genuine and more profound than that which is alleged to exist at present – one which would logically result in the dissolution of English departments and the disappearance of literary criticism as an academic activity.
CHAPTER 1

Preliminaries

Today it is virtually impossible for practising critics not to be aware of some need to ‘justify’ what they do – to ‘ theorize’ their practices. Indeed theory has now become a subject in its own right in English studies, with its own undergraduate courses, postgraduate degrees, text-books and so on. The rapid growth of the ‘theory industry’, however, has not passed unnoticed or unchallenged; along with the enthusiasm for this new theoretical abundance there has in recent years been something of a countervailing movement. United by a general feeling of dissatisfaction rather than by any particular thesis, an increasing number of critics have been calling for a halt or, at the very least, a pause to take stock of the current situation. In their view the popularity and growth of the theory industry, far from reinvigorating the discipline, have led to what they see as a ‘crisis’ in which the ‘traditional’ conception of English seems on the point of disappearance.¹

Within this countervailing movement it is possible to identify two groups. On the one hand there are those critics who, while accepting the value and necessity of explicit theorizing, have

¹ This phenomenon has been noted by a variety of commentators. See, for example, Peter Washington, *Fraud: Literary Theory and the End of English* (London, 1989); Bernard Bergonzi, *Exploding English* (Oxford, 1990); Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller, *Re-Thinking Theory* (Cambridge, 1992). It is important to note here that the significance of the term ‘traditional’ differs in Britain and the United States. In the United States the teaching of literature has usually been part of a general humanities education – that tradition which has been polemically described by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (London, 1987) as the ‘old Great Books conviction’ (p. 51). In Britain, by contrast, the traditional teaching of English refers to the period when the autonomy of the subject was assumed: one prior, that is, to the rise of cultural studies in the 1970s. For a fuller account of these distinctions, see chapters 2 and 3.
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nevertheless voiced some reservations about the ways in which theory is currently used in English studies. In particular they have pointed to the vexed relationship which now obtains between theory and pedagogy, and have suggested that there might be some important and (as yet) unresolved issues concerning the relationship between theory and practice in the discipline. On the other hand there is a lobby which may be broadly characterized as ‘anti-theory’, although a distinction needs to be made between two positions within it. One position attacks the very idea of theory, arguing that it has no relevance to English studies. Here prominent voices include, in the United States, Stanley Fish, and Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels and, in Britain, Patrick Parrinder and Peter Washington. The second position within the anti-theory lobby has concentrated on attacking the coherence of particular theories. Here theory in itself is not rejected; rather it is the application of particular theories which is criticized. Representative spokesmen for this position are Howard Felperin, Philip Smallwood, and Richard Freedman and Seumas Miller.\(^2\)

The rejection of the very idea of theory is the most radical of all these reactions to the theory industry. The polemic against theory by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels in 1982 is perhaps the best known of these criticisms, certainly in the United States. However their definition of theory, limited as it was simply to questions of interpretation and intention, now seems idiosyncratic and dated, although at the time of its publication it proved to be highly controversial.\(^3\) Moreover it

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\(^2\) See Stanley Fish, Doing What Comes Naturally (Oxford, 1989); Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, ‘Against Theory’, Critical Inquiry, 8 (1982), 723–42; Patrick Parrinder, The Failure of Theory (Brighton, 1987); Peter Washington, Fraud; Howard Felperin, Beyond Deconstruction (Oxford, 1985); Philip Smallwood, Critical Portraits of British Literary Critics (Hemel Hempstead, 1990); and Richard Freedman and Seumas Miller, Re-Thinking Theory. These critics’ specific criticisms of specific theories are discussed at appropriate points in later chapters.

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does not attend to the general question of the role of theory in disciplines of knowledge. As the relationship between theory and the disciplinary status of English studies is our main concern, we have taken Patrick Parrinder’s more recent The Failure of Theory (1987) as more representative of this kind of criticism. In that work Parrinder outlines a number of objections to the general use of theory in English studies. His list includes the quasi-scientific authority claimed for theory; the divorce of theory as an abstract or general explanation from its usefulness in practice; and the failure of different theorists to engage in coherent debate with each other. These objections then become for Parrinder the justification for a wholesale rejection of theory as theory; for him they demonstrate that literary judgements are simply incapable of theoretical analysis. In Parrinder’s view literary critics have no need to theorize their work (and indeed they should not even attempt to do so) because the special nature of English studies renders theoretical enquiry inappropriate:

The failure of theory need not be accompanied by literary suppression or political defeat, still less by martyrdom. It is, after all, simply the passing of a form of scholasticism. The brave new world of the theoretician canon ... is not one which can release creative energies or make the slightest contribution to liberating the world’s dispossessed ... Changing the canon is the key to changing the literary system. A canon is the consensus of the answers we should give if the proverbial Martian ethnographer, or for that matter the ghosts of William Empson or Max Raphael, were to turn up and ask, not ‘What is literature?’ but ‘What is your literature?’ And in answering that question we become not theorists but literary critics.5

It is interesting to note that Parrinder’s conclusions are very similar to those of Knapp and Michaels – that literature is by its very nature incapable of being theorized. However, unlike


4 Patrick Parrinder, The Failure of Theory (Brighton, 1987). It is perhaps worth noting that Peter Washington in Fraud shares Parrinder’s view that theory can and should be rejected by English studies.

5 Ibid., 105.