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LITERATURE, NATIONALISM AND THE NATION-STATE: 
THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION 
OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN 19TH CENTURY BRITAIN

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PASS WITH DISTINCTION
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As thesis advisor for Steven Holmes,

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

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CONTENTS

PRÈCIS

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION ............................................. 1
2. THE GENTLEMAN OF POLITE LETTRES ................. 6
3. CO-OPTING THE MIDDLE CLASS BY MYTH .............. 17
4. THE MATTER OF THEORY DRIVEN BY FEAR ............ 24
5. “WHITE ON WHITE” IDEOLOGICAL IMPERIALISM ...... 33
6. CONCLUSION: IMAGINED COMMUNITIES ............... 39

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................. 48
PRÉCIS

The study of English literature in any English speaking nation-state enjoys a relatively unquestioned role in both the curricula of public schools and universities. My paper traces the history of the relationship between the object of English literature and the university, from its initial ties to the identity of an English gentleman of polite letters in the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century assumption that vernacular literature embodied inherently English values. I contend that an under explored area of the history of university English study is its relationship to nationalism, especially regarding a national identity informed by the pairing of literature and a gentleman’s culture. This pairing allowed proponents of English literature to attribute literature’s contribution to a mythological pre-industrial common culture in an attempt to stave off a perceived cultural threat from the industrial masses. The bulk of my paper seeks to explore the moments when literature acted as an extension of English nationalism for purposes of cultural colonialism, both abroad and domestically, as well as to assess its potential influence on an English cultural identity.

All names and institutional figures that I discuss in my paper not only believed in the social mission for English literature but were also in positions to influence pedagogical methods as well. Thus, although it may seem paradoxical that a study of the use of English literature would not include commentary from the authors of English literature, my intent should be seen as attempting to separate the object of literature from the institutions that sought to utilize it. In this, as my conclusion demonstrates, English literature can be seen as a largely constructed tradition possessing a self-evident validity which can and should be questioned.

This paper is non-traditional in that it utilizes techniques from three scholarly fields: cultural studies, literature, and history. Although it is true that all three fields all use varying
degrees of historical methods, not many literary histories attempt to pinpoint a single, traceable social value for such a narrow subject over three centuries as I have in my paper. I use historical methods, but I also draw upon the insights of philosophers and literary critics to develop a cultural and historical argument about national identity and literature. My guiding theoretical impulse tends more towards this structuralized approach which believes that intellectuals were and are extremely important to the maintenance of British hegemony and an examination of their relationship to the ruling class can reveal many previously unseen connections between literature and national identity.

My study is especially relevant to the state of English studies today, in which the field possesses a tacit nationalistic orientation. University course titles, for instance, ubiquitously group authors by nation-state and century. However, a social mission for English literature is no longer the priority of the English department. Twentieth century English studies rely instead upon independent moral development rather relying upon an inherent value or national tradition contained in a work of literature. I conclude that such a social mission for literature could never have succeeded due to the simple fact that once English literature became institutionalized, the goal pursued alongside the moral mission, it became subject to criticism which then precluded any possibility for a unified reading in the service of aristocratic nationalism.

A more refined version of this research would expand the earlier pairing of English literature and gentlemanly taste, its influence on humanism in literature. I would seek to prove that the literary theory wars of the mid-twentieth century were not an attempt to reject the objectivity of Western literary objects, but rather an attempt to define the ill-conceived of project of English literary study.
Chapter I
Introduction

The study of English literature in Britain in the twentieth century enjoyed a relatively unchallenged role in pedagogical curricula, both in the public realm of state primary schools and the semi-public realm of the university system. As Chris Baldick states, “it would seem that the study of English Literature is accepted by most of its practitioners as a ‘natural’ activity without an identifiable historical genesis” (Baldick 3). Brian Doyle further acknowledges that the perceived social value of English literary studies enjoys a “normalized” position in English speaking nation-states (Doyle 2). Even the “lay” student who does not ultimately pursue a university or professional career in the literary arts is exposed to a variety of English literature by public school instruction. At the university level in Britain, students, regardless of their chosen field of study, are expected to demonstrate some degree of competence with composition techniques corresponding to the study of English literature.

While differences in critical approaches to “canonized” English literature authors such as William Shakespeare or John Milton are regularly subjected to scholarly debate and discussion, critical attention seldom seeks to explore the institutional and social origins of English studies. Although the use of literature as a vehicle of instruction proceeds from ancient times, only in the late nineteenth century did Britain attempt to categorically define a canon of literature in a vernacular language, English, and expect the transmission of ubiquitous moral values to the students who studied such a canon. By contrast, in the previous century the term “literature” to an Englishman would have represented the whole body of “value writing” in society and functioned as a tool for the reinforcement of social values and “habits of correct taste” (Eagleton 17). Literature included periodicals, social and aesthetic treatises, sermons, classical translations, and, especially, guidebooks to manners and morals. The faculty of the oldest and greatest
universities of Britain, Oxford and Cambridge, contemplated only Latin and Greek texts until the early twentieth century. Thus, it is immediately worth questioning how England, the birthplace of institutionalized English literary studies, refined its definition of literature to largely fictional or imaginative works of poetry and, later, a few novels written in the common vernacular.

The few institutional histories of English literature tend to dwell obsessively on the role of Matthew Arnold and his efforts to promote Classical, meaning Greek and Latin, literary study in Victorian England as a means of social control. Although Arnold is correctly credited with the designation as the first apostle of the truly literary, an often ignored history of teaching English literature begins with Adam Smith, the patriarch of laissez-faire capitalism, in eighteenth century Scotland. English literature was initially utilized by Smith as a rhetorical and grammatical education device of the finest usage of the English language available. Its purpose was to civilize native Scottish culture and promote English cultural and economic identity as dialectically "civilized" in opposition to the "barbaric" tastes of the lowland Scots; however, Smith also believed that literature could provide a humanizing impulse that might counter inherent moral deficiencies such as avarice that he saw in laissez-faire economics (Baldick 4). Likewise, English literature complemented secular education in Indian universities prior to any institutionalized effort for England's domestic citizens.

Colonial projects aside, domestic institutional histories group English studies into three phases: "rote language grind" of grammatical instruction, "to a stage which involved the transmission of cultural heritage" and finally to the post World War I method which "seeks to encourage in pupils personal growth through experience" (Doyle 6). However, this approach often ignores larger social processes by which values were attributed to the institutions of literature and thus to literature as an object of study. For instance, sixteenth and seventeenth
century Britain successfully created the cultural conditions by which the study of “polite letters”, English literature, was paired with the defining qualities of a gentleman. This trend manifested itself throughout English culture to the point where, in the height of British industrialism, English literature was defined as a vital link of national inheritance. Therefore, the impetus for domestic institutionalization of English literature lies in the emerging middle class’ desire to mimic the literary and educational tastes of the upper class who wished to incorporate not only the new middle class but the industrial masses of Britain. From these roots, both colonial and cultural, yet with a genuine democratic and vernacular educational potential, it is only in the late nineteenth century that Oxbridge, the highest education symbol in the Empire, begrudgingly accepted the study of English literature.

Fueled by fears of socialism, the success of the French revolution and its defeated aristocracy, and the perceived deterioration of religion as well as upper class taste as the dominant cultural force, the cultural and economic elite of the Victorian period sought a way to “maintain the economic status quo without redistributing any wealth” in the forms of socialistic initiatives (Barry 13). Correspondingly, many of the individuals associated with the first universities to teach English literature, such as King's College and London University, publicly and privately expressed hope that literary study could maintain the cultural status quo. A sense of pride in a national self, “English” created and sustained through the study of English literature that embodied a supposedly “organic”, pre-industrial, eighteenth century communal culture was their goal. Thus, the study of English literature was conceived as a means of instilling national pride as well as creating sympathy for the “high” culture of the aristocracy, a means of uniting classes.
The link between nationalism and literature culminated in the publishing of the 1926 *Teaching of English in England by the Board of Education*, a report produced by the newly formed English Association. The report tries to establish a place for the study of English literature among the subjects up for consideration for teaching in the newly formed public schools. By contrast, the elite universities were resistant to the notion of teaching literature in the vernacular because it was considered “vulgar” and of low “taste”, ironically vulgarizing the implement that English literature’s adherents believed so capable of social change. However, although English literature was eventually institutionalized at the university level by the early twentieth century, my main concern for this paper, the nationalist project for literary criticism failed to materialize in the manner in which was conceived by those who proposed the perceived moral benefits of English literature. From English literature’s use as a symbolic representative of English culture in its colonies both abroad and at home with its larger domestic colonies such as London’s East End, the institutions of English literary studies were tacitly nationalistic and value oriented to the detriment of “other” opposing cultural values. Thus, an underutilized approach to determining the social function of English literature is in its role towards maintaining and perpetuating myths of nationalism for an emerging British nation-state.

Nationalism and English literature have not been frequent bedfellows in academic discussions of individual texts or of aggregate artistic periods, a paradoxical attitude considering that even the categorizations of university study, such as nineteenth century American literature, Black British literature, are inherently grouped by nationality. Detractors from the humanist camp correctly indicate that literature has never enjoyed a widespread readership so they remain incredulous as to its contributions to nationalism. However, as Sarah Corse observes, the establishment of a canon of literature has “a highly symbolic value tied to the development of the
nation-state and are shaped by elite interests in national identity construction” (1). While the connection between language as a vehicle of cultural imperialism and literature, the best minds who wrote in the language, may be readily apparent, the cultural logic that led to English literature’s institutionalization is more complex. For instance, English literature in the nineteenth century was believed to be a vehicle of national transmission also because of developments in the “heritage of accumulated racial memory upon which the ideological framework for Western Civilization was constructed...[resulted in a] search in linguistic philosophy for original cultural forms and primitive mental structures that literature was thought to mirror” (Court 78). The primary impetus in institutionalizing literature, both from Adam Smith’s attempts at cultural reform in Scotland to the Newbolt report, was nationalistic. The institutions of English literary study thus aided the creation of a correspondent cultural mythology and its justification in order to legitimize and maintain an upper class cultural superiority.

This paper is not a comprehensive historical analysis of the institutionalization of English literature in Britain but an attempt to articulate the potential cultural impact on English national identity that literature was thought to be able to affect. It will trace the theoretical and actual relationship of the institutionalization of English literature to its incorporation in the “loftiest” universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the nineteenth and early twentieth century where, although it still retains the trappings of nationalism, its affective ability on the mass, pre-academic cultural scale has been rendered impotent. My contention is that, despite the contemporary lack of a wide readership, English literature did and does possess an ability to contribute to the imaginary sense of a British national identity; however, I will indicate that the rationale and conditions that led to the consideration of English literature as a vehicle for nationalism are precisely the conditions why it could never succeed. The most outstanding
reason had to do with the fact that most of those involved with the definition of the literary project were seeking to reconstruct this mythical historical identity for Britain based largely upon the coincidental positions of English literature, vernacular nationalism, and the tastes of the aristocracy.

English literature's importance and reification also occurs historically at moments of increasing interest in national identity or conversely through fear from an "other", "mass" civilization. Although I do not intend to decry English culture as patriarchal—though it was in the part, imperialist—which it thoroughly was, or decry its venerated status—which was self-legitimized and mythologized, I do wish to distinguish between the literary object and the philosophies behind why it was studied. The conclusion that all conceived social missions of English literature spawned not out of truly benevolent democratic concern, but from fear of the "vulgar" masses as well as the uncultured middle class that threatened to destabilize the traditional aristocratic order thus becomes more convincing. Consequently, the study of English literature was never clearly articulated until it was institutionalized because doing so could potentially, under critical self-examination, have disrupted the intended unified symbol of English literature being an integral, self-evident cultural extension of the upper class. Thus, in evaluating the earlier trends that eventually impacted the future institutionalization of English literature I will also mention how "taste" was articulated as a binary division between those that had culture and those Scots, Indians, and London East Ender's who lacked it, and thereby complicate the ideal, pre-industrial community dreamed up by the Victorian elite.
Chapter II
The Gentleman of Polite Lettres and Early Stages of the Myth of “taste”

The relationship between nationalism and literature is easily detected in the pre-nineteenth century English community. The vernacular literature was employed only as an elementary education tool for grammatical instruction leading to Greek and Latin texts. The increasing trend that began to emerge was the awareness at the university, state, and intellectual level that the vernacular of the nation was not afforded any privileged status. The seventeenth century also demonstrates the beginnings of the inseparability of English literature, as it sought to gain recognition, from values such as “taste” and “civilization” and, as I will demonstrate via the case of Scotland, colonialization. This period also demonstrates that literature of Greek and Latin were properties of the scholar and not established cultural possessions of a clearly demarcated landed aristocracy; therefore, the advocacy for a literature in the vernacular is paired from the beginning with the makings of a gentleman will have great influence on Victorian literary criticism.

Prior to the social use of English literature in Scotland, English literature and language study is still explicitly interconnected with nationalism despite having no recognition at the university level. In 1598, George Puttenham, the generally acknowledge author of The Arte of English Poesie congratulated poets, such as Spenser and Chaucer, who had “so much beautified our English tong (tongue) as at this day it will be found our nation is nothing inferior to the French or Italian” (qtd. in Palmer 1). He was among others, as R.F. Jones observes in The Triumph of the English Language, who demonstrated that the new vernacular literature was increasingly regarded as a national possession. It is true that a lack of a “viable political center” in the sixteenth century did not allow for the institutionalized, either privately or publicly through governmental support, teaching of vernacular texts in any language (Court 10).
However, the English language had managed to establish a “proper” system of grammar in what linguists refer to as Chancery Standard by 1450 (Fisher 19). Linguist John Fisher, in his extensive study of the early standardization of the English vernacular, notes that

A national language is the nerve center of national memory, the most important medium through which national traditions are nurtured and transmitted. In each country the use of vernacular writing for government and business preceded the awakening of what Auerbach calls “vernacular humanism,” that is, the development of the vernacular into a vehicle for literature and culture. In some instances, important literary works appear concomitant with the emergence of the vernacular standard, for example...the poems of Chaucer in England, but it can be shown that these poems were not themselves creators of the literary languages but are early examples of the emerging official standard (Fisher 21, 22).

According to Fisher, English language was standardized first by the state and then within literature while the language of the populace followed behind this bulwark. After they have been codified, written languages have “more influence upon the structure and pronunciation of the spoken than the spoken on the structure and orthography of the written” (22).

English was already the language of the common people but the dialect of the aristocracy and the judiciary was the model for the standard. It is therefore also important to observe that the earliest standardization of the vernacular language is not only interconnected with nationalism but with being representative of dominant cultural power. Within the confines of this scenario, a national literature would seem to logically represent a natural fulfillment of the symbolic role of standardization of vernacular; only by merit of standardization, may deviations from form be noticed and assigned a value structure so the vernacular norm must precede the work of literature. Thus, it is equally as noteworthy that amongst the higher education annals, Latin and Greek, were considered the only worthwhile and, consequently, valuable texts upon which a university student could spend his time. While English may have become the language of the courts, the scholars were devoted entirely to a pre-Anglo-Saxon culture. However, this
early trend towards the standardization of English is crucial to note because it manifested itself throughout English history. Eric Hobswam notes that by the second half of the eighteenth century, English civilization was largely a linguistic concept: a “terrain in which vocabulary and syntax distinguished the refined and civilized from the vulgar and the savage, a vocabulary and syntax that had its roots in the centuries preceding this development” (Hobswam qtd. in Court 12).

The standardization of English grammar enabled texts of English literature to gain a small institutionalized foothold. For example, the guiding spirit of the sixteenth century grammar school sought to train its pupils to speak and write correct Latin. However, English texts were employed as grammatical practice for beginners before continuing on to Latin and were not studied for their own properties. English grammar school master Richard Mulcaster argues in the sixteenth century that English had become a respectable literary language because of the study of its standardized grammar, noting that the “spirit of Elizabethan nationalism dictated that the language of England have proportionate respect to its military power” (Mulcaster qtd. in Court 11). In publishing *The First Part of the Elementair*, a work designed to extend and improve preliminary instruction, Mulcaster visibly attempted to further the public cause of English language study (Palmer 4). Other advocates such as John Brinsley advocated the study of English because it was the language of common usage, and, anticipating nineteenth century attitudes, that to advance its “puritie (purity) and elegance” was further to “imitate the Greeks and Romans, who did as much for their native tongue” (Brinsley qtd. in Palmer 4). As early as the sixteenth century there exists an early interest in cultural autonomy for the English language as well as the effects of its standardization seeping into the educational curricula.
During the rise of Puritan Dissent, the Dissenters conceived of using English literature as a potential vehicle to promote or enhance religious doctrine. Dr. Gill, a Dissenter of note, used a textbook to promote idea that written works in English could be used to propagate religious principles (Palmer 4). A combination of the Puritan split in conjunction with the Act of Toleration in 1689 allowed the opening of Dissenting academies, and provided a general education alternative to that of the universities. These academies immediately began studying modern languages alongside Classical study, teaching sons of the middle class alongside sons of gentry whose attitudes were sympathetic to the Puritans in a rare display of class unity (Court 24). For the first time under some manner of institutional guidance, these academies sought to impart “useful knowledge” in the form of morality through English literature rather than simply educate students in the formal uses of its grammar (24).

In 1729, Philip Doddridge opened an Academy at Northampton and became one of the first tutors to teach in English (Palmer 8). Palmer notes that Northampton seemed to be a “cradle for English studies” because Doddridge allowed his students to study English literature for its stylistic rather than its grammatical qualities (8). At Warrington Academy 1757, John Aikin illustrated his classical lectures with quotations from modern poetry (8). Another well known Dissenter, Joseph Priestly, published a text *Rudiments of English Grammar adapted to the use of Schools* which contained excerpts from the *Bible*, Addison, Young, Bolingbroke, Hume, Swift, Pope, and Wolsey’s farewell speech from Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* (McMurtry 9). These authors, far from being chosen simply because they wrote stylistically in English, were tied to a very rough conception that the study of polite letters, their letters, would improve the moral character of a young man for “civil and active life” (9).
This significant and understated development by most histories of English literature occurred in the early eighteenth century with the codification of the habits of a "gentleman" by authors such as Daniel Defoe in *The Complete English Gentleman*. Defoe tells us that "A man may be a schollar (scholar)… and be good for nothing, be a meer (mere)… Greek and Latin monger" because the scholar does not recognize the language of the people (201). He urges instead that a man should be "a man of polite learning and not a meer (meer) fschollar (scholar)" because a scholar understands "every body" but "not body (nobody)", in that he prized Greek and Latin philosophy over the texts in the vernacular (203). Defoe studied at Newington Green Academy, one of the new Dissenting Academies; thus, his text, and others echoing similar sentiments, help legitimize the study of English literature as a non-scholarly means of instilling the "taste" of a gentleman. Defoe actually intends this text to correct the deficiencies of the gentry especially in those whose "fathers and mothers deny’d them the dead learning of the tongues and that they were not taught as they fshould (should)” (218). As further evidence of Defoe’s work being part of a prevalent social trend, Palmer cites the “fruitless” proposals of Thomas Sheridan for reforming the curricula of the universities towards utilizing literature in these ends (Palmer 12). Other treatments of the gentleman such as John Cleland’s *Institution of a Young Nobleman* in 1737 were also published in this era. Cleland mirrors Defoe because he recommends that his readers “cultivate the literature of their own tongue”, while too much classical study was considered unbecoming to a gentleman (Cleland qtd. in Palmer 9). The explanation for the willingness of the English gentleman to accept this cultural definition lies in the readiness of small but increasing middle class and its desire to mimic and appreciate the tastes and standards of their social superiors, either intellectually or socially. Palmer alleges that there existed a willingness to follow dictation in matters of correct taste that consequently made
an acquaintance with the best authors a mark of breeding in young gentlemen (9). Since no previous theory or purpose governed the object of English literature it could simply be attributed some inherent and definable qualities desirable to a gentleman of taste.

The eventual usage of English literature in eighteenth century Scotland was prompted by a generally “good-natured” concern on behalf of British educated aristocrats who desired to economically integrate their colony. I would qualify “good-natured” because the intent was benevolent in spirit but not in the letter of the purpose which amounted to little less than cultural erasure of “Scottish-ness”. The first English literature related title in a British university is the Regius chair of English Language and Literature which became established at Glasgow University in 1762 (Palmer 17). An unprecedented course in English belles-lettres to be taught in Scotland at the university level was promoted by a series of lectures by Adam Smith. His lectures incorporated knowledge of English language through literary and rhetorical study as essential to Scottish economic success. However, while the connections between conducting business in a ubiquitous language of English are readily seen, behind the impetus to teach the Scots can be seen ulterior motives of cultural importance.

One such motive stemmed from a private concern on behalf of Adam Smith as well as other political economists of the period with the problematic dissociation between the mechanisms of industrial capitalism and moral and intellectual behavior. He articulated many of these concerns in a lesser known work, compared to his magnum opus The Wealth of Nations, entitled The Theory of Moral Sentiments. Smith acknowledged that although “people appear to be basically selfish, they also have natural propensity to be interested in the fortune of others” (Smith 117). He felt that the middle class and lower classes, in English as well as Scotland, needed to continually sustain an enlightened self-interest in order to balance the passion for
economic success and its potential all-encompassing avarice with morality in a laissez-faire
economy. Smith conceived of English literature texts as potentially able to "provide raw
materials that supported" his philosophical generalizations governing moral human behavior
(21). For example, he felt that Swift's "language is more English than any other writer that we
have" (Smith qtd. in Crawford 30). It is therefore fair to say that Smith believed that the study of
literature could help maintain a functional self-regulation of the market through some variety of
enlightening properties inherent to it. His theory, lacking any real theoretical or practical support
for his pedagogical beliefs, reflects the previous centuries' association of the gentry, the
historically successful economic class, with polite letters in English. Since English literature
symbolized the gentleman who more often than not was wealthy, the connection between
economic success and literature was not difficult to manufacture in the classroom.

Smith's encouragement in this endeavor came in part from Lord Kames, a Scottish
Supreme Court judge, who believed that the Scots needed "taste". For instance, as Crawford
observes, literature was seen by Kames "as a way to transcend class-based distinctions of
refinement and to promote English citizenship" (20). Although Smith is not quite an isolated
attempt to use literature for some sort of social mission, it would be an overstatement to declare
that his influence was pervasive or iconoclastic to indigenous Scottish culture. His example
should demonstrate instead one of the earliest attempts by a "higher" culture to use literature for
socially and culturally constructive purposes as well as indicative of an English cultural identity.
This incident of promoting English-ness at the expense of Scottish-ness is not, however,
indicative of a singular opinion, Smith and Kames', but was a prevalent English cultural attitude
as a London newspaper correspondent warned his readers in the seventeenth century that
“Scoticisms can divert attention from a speaker's subject-matter, leading him to lose political and other arguments” (qtd. in Crawford 33).

Following Smith and Kames’ example, the Scottish universities developed a corresponding canon of writers who are approved for their proper English style, of course taking it for granted that “proper” style must be “without Scotticism or Gallicism” (Crawford 38). To twentieth century sensibilities it may be difficult to see how Shakespeare constituted a representative English cultural entity but, without a coherent theoretical basis for understanding texts, rhetorically and grammatically they functioned well. Finally, Crawford notes that the “attack on the distinctive Scottish cultural tradition was one mounted by [elite] Scots themselves”, by national political figures such as Kames, and what “made the attack all the easier was the increasingly widespread dissemination of English texts regarded as canonical” (39).

This top down trend of viewing those without social and economic privilege as self-sustaining their own moral and cultural poverty is a trend that would haunt English literature until the twentieth century. Therefore, through Defoe and Smith, two potential social uses for English literature have been articulated without any legitimate or historical basis behind them other than the coincidence of being written in the vernacular and representing the cultural tastes and standardized dialects of the economic elite. It is enough in the seventeenth century that the literature is written stylistically in English, the language of the cultural power center, and that it related to the definition of an English gentleman which thereby embodied “English-ness”.

In defining an increasing desire for education in English, an additional factor as Brian Doyle and Benedict Anderson observe, is the development of the printing press in the seventeenth century which began to publish books in English believing a high profit could be
had simply because of a larger available reading base than that for Latin (Doyle 9; Anderson qtd. in Webb 9). Due largely to the printing press and an increasing reader base for the vernacular, as Joan McMurtry maintains, it would not be unusual to see texts of the Bible, Shakespeare, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Spenser's Faerie Queen, Milton's Paradise Lost, and Pope in many middle class and upper class homes, largely due to the desire to mimic the acceptable modes of gentlemanly behavior (McMurtry 9). McMurtry comments that eighteenth century England saw a wealthier middle class and although English Literature was still ignored in Universities, the middle class had affluence, leisure time, and no Classical education, thereby increasing the potential appreciation for a vernacular subject (10). Although no formal instruction on theories in which the literature should be read or understood was available, McMurtry simply sees this increased readership as a reinforcement of the middle class desire to emulate upper class tastes. I would add to her observation that the desire to mimic derived in large part from the previous centuries' successful pairing of English literature and aristocratic taste. A theory that is helpful to bear in mind is Homi Babha's notion of "mimicry", the tendency that results from a desire by a social group, such as the burgeoning middle class, to be accepted, adopted, and absorbed by the upper class. They consequently accept the latter's definition of the former as legitimate; e.g. the "vulgar" accepting its position as "vulgar" in relationship to an upper class "civilized" culture (Babha 235). In a sense, to invoke Babha's spirit, the middle class sought to become symbolically more English than the upper class English simply to prove their English-ness.

Prior to the nineteenth century can be seen a palpable impulse from the middle class in their desire to mimic the taste of the upper class image of a gentleman. The gentleman, in reference to the mimicking middle classes as well as in respect to Adam Smith's fears,
increasingly existed in opposition to the business or industry related image. What also becomes crystallized out of this period is the categorization, based upon sophisticated or non-ritualized uses of the newly standardized English literature, of literary values based upon "style" that would eventually "give way to the teaching of literature as cultural history" (Palmer 14). Style, by method of the binary opposition between "taste" and "vulgar" would be a distinction used up to and continuing on in the twentieth century by merit of its normalized position relative to aristocratic taste. Additionally, this tie between the conceptions of a national identity interconnected with upper class values as then consequently expressed through the vernacular would provide a strong argument for those who sought to incorporate the English masses into the cultural hierarchy. To quote the 1755 dictionary of Samuel Johnson, "The various dialects of the same country...will always be observed to grow fewer, and less different, as books are multiplied...I have devoted this book to the honor of my country...the chief glory of every people arises from its author (Johnson qtd. in Doyle 25). Finally, as the middle class reader base reinforced the standardization of the vernacular dialect the English began to see themselves "as connected to each other by writing...in a textually based mutual recognition of relationship between disparate readers (McMurtry 10). Thus, the eventual availability of an association to an imaginary community of nationalism would not prove to be a difficult transition.
Chapter III
Co-opting the Middle Class by Myth

Although by the nineteenth century government documents, business transactions, and an increasing amount of poetry were already written in English, academia proved a resolute non-participant. A few non-traditional universities, seeking to combat the moral deficiencies caused by industrial capitalism, began to provide a “poor-man’s” Classical education at a near university level. The poor-man’s new teacher or professor represented the “moral gentleman” who should form the character of students (Wiener 22). This ethos sought to fuse aristocratic as well as professional values in an attempt to ward off the avaricious tendencies of industrialism. However, most of these schools still reflected the national icon of education, Oxbridge’s, distain for the industrial world (22). Since Oxbridge collectively produced most “recruits to higher civil service” who had little to no experience with the industrial order, it also began to lure away the sons of the middle class who would then join the aristocratic ranks as they sought prestigious and traditionally aristocratic social positions (Wiener 14). Himself a product of the new leisure time given to the children of the business class, renowned philosopher Bertrand Russell remarked that “the concept of the gentleman was invented by the aristocracy to keep the middle classes in order” (Russell qtd. in Wiener 14). Defoe’s notion that the gentleman should amuse himself with polite letters while the scholar should study Greek and Latin still held cultural prominence in the nineteenth century. Wiener observes that at the moment of the business classes’ triumph “the entrepreneurial class turned its energies to reshaping itself in the image of the class it was supplanting” (14). Clearly, Babha’s notion of mimicry is still functioning in the nineteenth century.

As indicated earlier in this paper, many approaches to the institutionalization of literature tend to dwell on canonical literary figures such as Matthew Arnold while paying too little
attention to the men who actually established practices of studying literature in the universities. These other figures demonstrate that many of the motivations for studying English literature continued to manifest the pairings of taste, the gentry, and an evolving sense of English-ness as governed by the previous century. In an undervalued moment in the history of literature’s institutionalization, University College’s founding in 1826 followed Lord Henry Brougham’s proposal to co-create several new universities using the vernacular as a primary method of instruction. Many Dissenter academies also sought to relocate to London. For instance, Northampton moved to London as “Coward College” (Palmer 21). Modern languages were taught, coincidentally, as most early professors were Scottish university graduates whose preferences, decades later, reflected the effectiveness of the English cultural dominance started by Adam Smith and Lord Kames (21). University College offered a completely secular education to multi-class audiences, whereas its neighbor King’s College was founded in response by Anglican forces upon the principle that religion and education could not be severed. King’s approach was simply to conflate the poetic imagination as a locus of moral insight for purposes of spiritual affirmation.

By contrast, University College’s curricula emphasized composition and more scientific and factual study of language. Thomas Dale, the Dean of University College in 1828, in a text often taken to be his policy statement, believed that “mental culture should be connected with moral instruction”, a statement which provides further evidence of the secular conflation of education with moral affectability (Dale qtd. in Palmer 21). However, the means for achieving this goal remained unformulated because English literature was still used only for grammatical and rhetorical purposes. In one such example highlighting the disconnection between a text’s literary qualities and its usage, quotations from Shakespearian plays, which are standard texts in
the twentieth century British canon, are included on a few early exams as examples of poor
grammar for students to parse and correct (21). These literary values would seem curious to the
modern student of literature because he or she would not be used to devaluing a work of English
literature by its literal grammatical fallacies; the example serves well to indicate the lack of a
theory behind the inherent "moral" qualities of English literature. No scope for critical
imagination or social purpose was questioned because examination questions tended to focus
more on history and regurgitation. A typical exam question would state: "who is first
distinguished writer of English prose? Point out the characteristic features of his style, and say
in what respect it differs from that of Lord Clarendon" (qtd. in Palmer 24). Style differentiation
had become a source of value and not a source of meaning value; meaning was simply assumed
to be an inherent quality of English literature.

While English literature began to be received into a non-traditional academic culture, the
working classes developed a non-mimicking impetus for social use of English literature. Many
scholars have noted that British society, by the eighteenth century, was aware of far-reaching
changes affecting a traditional stability in English society with proof lying in the increased
demand for literacy in the newly developed Adult Schools. Many working class adults
participated in these civic institutions in addition to their already long work day (Doyle 30). The
first unified approach to meet the new working class interest established the London Mechanics
Institute in 1823. Indicative of growing interest in literacy, there were five hundred such
institutions by 1850 and most included lectures on English literature as a part of their curricula in
order to allow its participants make some acquaintance with the national literature (30). The
workers' lack of the elementary education necessary to study science coupled with their
"persistent demand for classes in political economy" caused the upper class to regard these
institutes as "hotbeds of sedition" (Palmer 32). It was hoped that "literature could [counteract] the corrupting influences caused by the oppressive condition in mines and factories and cities, and the dangerous political extremism that was bred there", stated the goals of Henry Brougham, one of the philanthropic personalities who helped establish these institutions (Brougham qtd. in Palmer 33). Charles Dickens and Cowden Clarke were among the most popular lecturers who frequented the Institutes, in addition to men of letters who performed Shakespearean readings. Still, literature was mostly amusing to the "masses" and not an object of serious study for them. Also coincident with this movement, James Hole noted at the time, was the hope that even a small exposure to the hierarchies of taste would make the mechanics less open to the "corruption" of popular fiction (34). Thus, the values on literature informed by the gentry are still very much a part of the fabric of social existence for the English and increasingly for the lower class.

English literature at the civic university level attempted to be democratic in its approach. At Queen's College for Women, Dean Charles Kingsley called English literature an "autobiography of a nation" (Kingsley qtd. in Palmer 40). This is a Romantic attitude to invest literature with authority, giving it an "isolate function as a culture of the feelings" (Kingsley 40). Two early examples of this secular Romanticism is John Stuart Mill's tribute to the healing powers of Wordsworth's poetry as well as Shelly's notion that "poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb" (Shelly qtd. in Doyle 36). The reports from the Taunton Commission in 1868 revealed that nearly "half of the endowed grammar schools were no longer teaching any Latin or Greek" but English, which indicated a sort of grassroots success for the fledging subject. Further prompting for the prominence of English came from J.W. Hales who, in the same year, became
Professor of English at Bedford College for Women with an express wish to dislodge the Classics from academia.

In a shift declarative of the increasing national importance of English, for the first time an knowledge of English literary subjects was required on Civil Servants Examinations. With Parliament’s passage of the 1853 East India Act, all administrative posts in the empire became open to competitive examination (Baldick 70). The impetus for the testing derived from Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay who, in an 1835 paper often referenced by British postcolonial scholars as the infamous “Macaulay’s Minute on Indian Education”, stated that “intellectual pursuits are the cultivation of which the superiority of the European race principally depends” as well as “to trade with civilized men is infinitely more profitable than to govern savages” (Macaulay 200). Civic school and university dons began to complain that their best students were being distracted from their proper studies by these examinations, a fact which demonstrates that the middle class gentry were highly interested in attaining posts most commonly associated with the aristocracy (Baldick 70). J.C. Collins tutored candidates to pass these exams while Matthew Arnold acted as an exam proctor. Gauri Viswanathan, in his study of the British colony of India during Macaulay’s time notes that

    British colonial administrators, provoked by missionaries on the one hand and fears of native insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education, (17)

which was in turn was offered to the natives as a matter of improving their economic lot—a cultural situation Macaulay advocated at home as well.

    I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the Oriental plan of education (Macaulay 220).
In the Preface to Macaulay’s self-documented collection of speeches, he states that upon reflection “I have not made alterations for the purpose of saving my own reputation either for consistency or for foresight. I have not softened down the strong terms in which I formerly expressed opinions which time and thought may have modified” which simply demonstrates how entrenched these colonial attitudes were among English political leaders (Macaulay 4). During another of his speeches at the Opening of the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution, he again indicates that “the whole of that class whole benefit we have peculiarly in view, there will be a moral and an intellectual improvement; that many hours, which might otherwise be wasted in folly or in vice...purifying and edifying (Macaulay 343). Macaulay’s opinion is not an isolated sentiment but a revelation of the deep seated cultural logic that had paired English literature with English culture to the point, although it still had no organized or guiding spirit, of concluding that mere contact with it should have been enough to convert the savages. His remarks should be considered a definitive cultural manifesto of the nineteenth century view of English literature; as one historian concludes, “all educated opinion, in England, on the Continent, and in America, agreed that he was the most distinguished man of letters that England had to show” (Clive ix).

This paper thus far has dealt with a select, but relevant, historical documentation on emerging public education and the new colleges in which English literature was afforded a privileged status for improving both writing abilities and “taste”. However, no ubiquitous critical methods or “high culture” status was recognized by government mandate, except indirectly through figures such as Macaulay. It is also impossible from the history I have previously outlined to see the introduction of literature as a natural phenomenon. The reader must bear in mind that these stages are only the requisite history that will govern the forthcoming discussion of the relationship between English literature and a prevailing sense of “Englishness”.  

22
The pre-academic institutional culture has been saturated by binaries such as "good taste" versus "vulgar" and the desire of the middle class to mimic the tastes of the aristocracy; thus, literature is beginning to represent a socially prized value of civilized taste. However, the push towards institutionalization is ultimately driven by increasing aristocratic and intellectual fears of populism. Out of this momentum from democratic initiative came the theorists who would finally prompt the adoption of English literature to the university: from the margins to the center.
Chapter IV
The matter of theory driven by fear: Matthew Arnold and Intellectual Vertigo

A discussion of English literature, language, and nationalism would be incomplete without due reference to Matthew Arnold, the "father" of literary humanism. While he is certainly a theorist by any other name, I wish to suggest that his impact was far less upon the symbolic, social, and consequent institutional role of English literature than many scholars credit to him. His pedagogical orientation was to study "the greatest works of the greatest minds" along side such maxims as "ideas cannot be too much prized in and for themselves, cannot be too much lived with; but to transport them abruptly into the world of politics and practice, violently to revolutionize the world to their bidding", do give credence to a genuinely humanistic vein of scholarship (Lectures and Essays in Criticism 256). However, Arnold tied literature to politics, while paradoxically trying to keep literature from the "polemics" of the material world.

Although I cannot hope to add much to the preponderance of scholarship on Arnold, his place in the history of the institutionalization of English literature must still be slightly complicated because it was largely him who articulated why and how literature should enter the national consciousness.

The pains associated with the miserable conditions of the Victorian working class have been well documented to the point that I do not feel the burden of demonstration necessary. Parliament's passages of the 1819, 1833, 1844, 1847, and 1850 Acts intended for worker rights not only indicate inhumane working conditions but an extreme reticence on behalf of the ruling class to acknowledge them. Despite the fact that the middle class and aristocracy themselves were largely shielded from long work hours but bothered by the relative inconvenience of having the city ruined by industrial smog and the filth caused by the worker ghettos, the intellectuals and "nouveau gentlemen" were left to dream, idealistically, of a rural, pre-Industrial age past. This
“organic” past somehow was lost within the industrial era; its embodiment lay in the eighteenth and seventeenth century where the poet was allegedly the representative of the people and all Englishmen shared a common, permanent culture. With all due respect to many of these intellectual conclusions, my discussion of the previous century demonstrates the degree of historical amnesia required to conceive of there being an “English” literature representative of a common culture. It merely added insult to injury that the masses not only involuntarily worked long hours but consequently had their emerging mass tastes immediately decried as “vulgar”. A systematized project developed of defining the “masses” not only as culturally homogenous, but almost as a sort of internal colony due to pervasive and ubiquitous rhetoric by politicians and intellectuals.

Coincident with the poor working conditions were the philosophies increasing in social circulation, stemming from Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau and contemporary philosophers such as Karl Marx who published his *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. The decapitation of the French aristocrats in the French Revolution was a matter of equal concern for the aristocratic status quo that saw this event as a culmination of the failure of a dominant, aristocratic culture. In a self-defensive gesture, most intellectuals interpreted the Revolution as an example in which politics had moved away from the realm of ideas to the realm of action. Matthew Arnold used the Revolution as a mobilizing point for his theories of literary culture calling it “the greatest, the most animating event in history” (Arnold qtd. in Baldick 21). However, as Baldick observes, “the revolution was”, in Arnold’s mind, “regrettable” for giving “immediate political and practical application to all these fine ideas of the reason” (21). Like many aristocrats and intellectuals, Arnold shuddered at the thought of especially progressive ideas leaving the intellectual sphere and flying straight into the political.
Thus, as he would later elaborate in *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*, “everything was long seen, by the young and ardent amongst us, in inseparable connection with politics and practical life...let us think of quietly enlarging our stock of true and fresh ideas, and not, as soon as we get an idea be running out with it into the street” (Arnold qtd. in Baldick 23).

Arnold rather sought to disconnect literature from politics in hope of presenting a unified version of literature that could allow men’s minds to reach into higher, non-materially conditioned realms. His pointed gaze is not so much at the “barbarians” or the “populace” but at his “philistines”—the same mercantile class that Smith a century earlier had feared would interrupt the cultural standard. He lambasted them,

[Consider] their way of life, their habits, their manners...observe the literature they read, the things which give them pleasure...would any amount of wealth be worth having with the condition that one was to become just like these people by having it?” (Arnold 333-34).

Arnold felt that the middle class should be the natural educator of the lower class. He also felt certain that without prompting they would “almost certainly fail to “mould or assimilate the masses below them” and that result would be anarchy” (*Democratic Education* qtd. in Baldick 34). Arnold felt that Adam Smith’s prediction had attained fruition; the culture-less and avaricious business class had failed to successfully mimic the tastes and culture of the aristocracy. However, his admission tacitly acknowledges how successful the upper class had been in creating the conditions conducive for the mimicry desire of the middle class, regardless of its success.

Arnold is also widely noted as an early enthusiast for public schools. He hoped that a newly trained body of teachers could be brought “into intellectual sympathy with the upper class” (Baldick 34). Unfortunately, as I indicated previously, Arnold’s cultural theory must do away with political attachments or class distinctions, a move which allowed Arnold to bring the
"individual conscience into immediate relation with the state, and dismissing all that lies between (classes, political rights, independent institutions) as just so much fetishized machinery" (Baldick 35). Arnold is thereby able to rely only upon moral causes for status quo strife (Baldick 35).

Arnold lamented that in England "a man feels that the power which represses him is the Tories, the upper classes, the aristocracy, and so on" (Arnold qtd. in Baldick 36). Like Macaulay before him, Arnold seems incapable of recognizing that it is the state and its intellectuals who will endlessly try to justify or define and idealize its mechanisms of "oppression" and in doing so ignore precisely the cultural and class hierarchy that perpetuates the problem—not the moral deficiencies of the populace.

With the previous discussion in mind, it should be no surprise that Arnold turned to poetry with its socially de-historicized nature as representative of the gentleman and the perceived stability of the traditional order. Distrusting any possible approach of the state legal apparatus, he commented: "compare the stability of Shakespeare with the stability of the Thirty-Nine Articles!" (39). Baldick further observes that Arnold has not done away with a theory for literature; he has instead created his own anti-theory which is a united view of the social application of the study of poetry. Literature's purpose was to combat the "narrowness of class life", which is a theme highly reminiscent of Adam Smith's proposal (Arnold qtd. in Baldick 40).

Thus, literature had evolved from grammatical study and mere aristocratic "taste" to a transcendent object capable of social class unification. Arnold's contributions to the survival of an upper class English identity is in maintaining the durability of the mythologized traditional culture which he saw as providing social order; it mattered not to him whether its literature would be in Latin, Greek, or English because any literary source was preferable to immediate democratization and its accompanying mass culture. His fears of this mass culture were
legitimate in as far as the working class actually had developed its own culture: a mix of eclectic folk traditions, resistances to working class conditions, as well as appropriations of the “high culture” poetic forms.

Unfortunately for the grassroots English literature movement, Arnold did not really intend English literature to be widely studied. His pleasures were rather Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Goethe, and number of “more obscure French writers” (Baldick 59). However, his cry was immediately appropriated by English literature teachers. H.G. Robinson, a teacher at York Training College, paraphrased Arnold as he wrote, in 1860, that “The student will learn to appreciate the temper with which great minds approach the consideration of great questions...that the world is a good deal wider than his own sect, or party, or class.” (Robinson qtd. in Baldick 60). The newer and less traditional universities immediately responded to Arnold’s articulation which has at long last defined a social usefulness for English literature in a secular yet moral manner.

What intellectuals such as Arnold recognized more fully and responded to more effectively than previous advocates for the social significance of English literature was that in the face of a faltering traditional cultural order, the English desperately wanted a stable “psychological shelter” that they “had once found in organized religion” (Wiener 5). Wiener maintains that “the radical, [cultural], right’s innovation was to realize the potential of nationalism to serve as modernity’s civic religion” (42). This shelter could only be an alternative self-image provided in part through literature which was, by the late Victorian age, a permanent factor in non-academic English culture. Wiener also notes two separate myths at play: that of the north marked by capitalism and that of the south by traditional, agrarian norms (42). This

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1 For a full discussion of English working class culture, see Martha Civinus’ The Industrial Muse: a Study of Nineteenth century British Working-class Culture. NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 1974,
notion, foregrounded by many intellectuals, conservatives, and leftists such as Richard Wollheim who saw a “collective, unalienated folk society” rooted in time and space (Wollheim qtd. in Wiener 26).

The pervasive upper-class disenchantment with industrialism eventually led to a “change in [cultural] content without changing form” (Wiener 43). The paradox lay in that although industrialism was the creation of the English, it also seemed alienating and threatening which would explain a subsequently developing fascination with ruralism: the so-called “Janus Face” of English cultural identity. Ruralism manifested itself not only in trying to save old buildings but the alleged collective inheritance of a previous English common culture. This organic essence of pre-industrial English was thought to be the “heritage of accumulated racial memory upon which the ideological framework for Western Civilization was constructed” (Court 100). Even within the academic elite of Oxbridge, “a search commenced in linguistic philosophy for ordinary cultural forms and primitive mental structures that literature was though to mirror” (100).

Perhaps revisiting the same spirits as those of Smith towards Scotland, King’s College Dean Dover Wilson urged a link towards this increasingly mythological culture, governed by literature and industry. As the organic myth manifested itself, Wilson mandated that “what is wrong with our industry is not so much low wages or long hours as its lack of social meaning in the eyes of those performing its operations, and what is wrong with our culture is its divorce from the crafts of common life” (Wilson qtd. in Baldick 100). Wilson’s fellow educator George Sampson is equally as fiery: “It is because I know that the power of the evil is so strong and the power of the good as yet so small that I beg the place of honour in the fight for our own great native force—the illustrious, cardinal, courtly and curricular vernacular” of England (Sampson qtd. in Baldick 100). Manners also never left Sampson’s definition, “a humane education is a
possession in which rich and poor can be equal without any disturbance to their material possessions”, meaning of course as long as the lower class accepted fully the culture of the upper class (100). Wilson and other non-Oxbridge university scholars possessed an eagerness to “send missionaries into the industrial centers”, like England’s East End (Baldick 85). Since literary heritage was now increasingly becoming part of the English identity, coupled with Arnold’s theories, the connection had finally been established between an organic heritage embodied within English authors and their works’ contribution to national identity. This national identity, through English literature, was consequently thought to represent an accessible cultural object for the masses as well as simultaneously symbolize the legitimacy and supremacy of upper class taste.

The clearest articulation of the relationship between English-ness and literature came from F.R. Leavis, the post-world war one founder of Scrutiny. Leavis began where Matthew Arnold had finished with the “best of what was thought and said” and reduced it to an English literary tradition. Quoting I.A. Richards, Leavis states that the

rearguard of Society cannot be extricated until the vanguard has gone further...to set up as a critic is to set up as a judge of values...the minority capable not only of appreciating Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Baudelaire, Hardy but of recognizing that their latest successors constitute the consciousness of the race...upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age” (Leavis 13, 14).

Although Arnold had not explicitly tied nationalism and heritage to taste, his intellectual progeny did not feel so indifferently. Leavis even went so far as to conceive of an aggression from below by viewing the term “high-brow”, a lower class description of English literature, as indicative of the “hostile environment” towards upper-class taste (18). Mentioning I.A. Richards, he remarks “we cannot help clinging to some such hope as Mr. [I.A.] Richards offers; to the belief (unwarranted, possibly that what we value most matters too much to the race to be finally
abandoned, and that the machine will yet be made a tool” (19). Leavis, in the post-World War I era, demonstrates that the “tastes” of the gentleman, which was paired with English literature in the seventeenth century, now represent the “consciousness of the race”.

The literary implications of the organic myth refer to the conception that one should read the seventeenth century poets to see windows into their organic culture rather than to mold it to one’s own critical purposes. It was also a paradoxical version of English-ness, points out Wiener as he notes the “historic irony that the nation that gave birth to the industrial revolution” adopted “a conception of Englishness that virtually excluded industrialism” in combination with the aforementioned ruralism (5). Thus, the English genius, according to Arnold and Leavis, is rural, non-industrial, and non-innovative, but spiritual ahistorical (Wiener 6). Another layer of irony is that the “common culture” which England supposedly lost in the industrial revolution was comprised largely of the same people that just a century earlier were the “vulgar” commoners, the peasants, in opposition to an increasingly “taste-ful” aristocracy. In essence, there was no common English culture but a history of standardized upper-class dialect followed by the normalization of a new literary symbol of upper class taste.

An explanation for the success of this myth lies in British industrialism’s growth from within, unlike in many other parts of the world such as in America (6). Upper class society culturally and intellectually turned towards the past while governing a modern industrial society. This type of revision is identical to that attempted by the proponents of English literature. As I mentioned earlier, this fact may be reflected in both the politicians’ slow response to social welfare as well as in English literati’s dreams for an idealized past. In a more insidious vein, however, Homi Bhabha notes that in this sort of circumstance

the people are the historical ‘objects’ of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin
or event; the people are also the “subjects” of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process” (Bhabha 293).

The accuracy of Bhabha’s remarks is shown because, as Baldick observes, “nearly every theorist of popular literary education in this period attempts to show that great literature is capable of breaking down class differences and showing how unimportant they are” (95).

In Arnold’s defense, he thought a project of national English literary study foolhardy. He objected to literature being used in the name of ideology and observed that it would have “required mass educational conformity to the principles of high culture and the elimination of a corrosive political pluralism” (Court 8). Nonetheless, he largely defined “anarchy” as a dialectic point for an essentialized portrayal of the world and so helped legitimate the myth (Baldick 96). English literature now only had to take the next logical step: it already possessed a theory of social progressivity and believers, although not in large numbers, on all middle and upper class levels, as well as informal state recognition. Would English literature, poised in its moment of triumph, realize the momentum that had been building since Defoe connected English literature to “taste” and solidified it as a symbol of the aristocratic gentleman?
Chapter V
“English on English” Ideological Imperialism

Later in twentieth century Britain, novelist Salman Rushdie labels Britain's quarantining of its former colonial citizens, who sought identity in the idealized motherland governing their colonial upbringing, the “new colony within” (Rushdie 129); however, I would argue that a colony had already existed in the form of “English” on “English” ideological imperialism. The emerging rhetoric of nationalism sought to harness a newly inspired democratic energy towards a nationalist, reactionary agenda by directing its momentum towards this organic sense of English heritage. It is perhaps antithetical for the contemporary student to think of his or her own public education, which democracy demanded, as yet still being far from self-evident. Oppressive is perhaps too strong of a word to use in this case, but the educational aims, especially concerning the study of English did embody the tastes of the civilized.

Paradoxically, although national education is a democratic endeavor, the hierarchies of education that one would have to climb were not decided through negotiation between the classes, but a rigid ideological mindset of the post-Arnoldian humanists. Those who had argued so vociferously and articulately for the establishment of English literature departments, once the goal was attained, largely found themselves either plagued by the conscience of purpose or overdosed on idealism. Constantly de-historicized and institutionalized for both colonialism and the symbolic representation of the upper class culture, the institutionalization of English literature finally made the inevitable turn towards nationalism as the nation sought a rallying point. It is ostensible that an impulse in the 1890's toward national education resulted from a sense of perceived entitlement of national belonging, hence national identity, on behalf of British citizens thanks in part to this sense of a lost common culture that all the English once shared. From an essentialized view of the relationship between the governing institution and the
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individual, it seemed an ambitious project. Paradoxically, the study of literature is individual and private, yet the aims of a social mission for literature still promised a universal moral effect without a method.

World War I resulted in efforts to denigrate any Germanic inspired academic fields, especially philology, by an elevation of English culture from within the upper echelons of British university education. As Sir Walter Raleigh would comment, “I should like to get up a team of 100 Professors and challenge 100 Boshe professors. Their deaths would be a benefit to the human race” (Raleigh qtd. in Palmer 104). Raleigh’s agonistic attitude is appropriate because to finally make its way to the institutions of Oxford and Cambridge that produced the majority of British civil servants and politicians, and whose legitimization would fully represent national symbolic acceptance, English literature had to displace the German philologists. Oxford was among the first of the great institutions to consider English due to the efforts of its champion John Church Collins. As Baldick states, “having gone among the Philistines, the movement for English literary culture now returned to claim its place at Oxford in a form which invited suspicion and reserve” (Baldick 71).

Collins’ greatest battles were with the philologists and the Saxonist scholars. After the Merton Professorship of English Language and Literature was established at Oxford in 1884, it was immediately awarded to a German trained philologist (Baldick 73). Collins attacked German philology as a mere fact-grubbing subject (71). Philologists responded, indicating the historical lack of formalized study methods for literature and thereby indicating its subordinate position. They additionally expressed their concern “that the study of English literature would degenerate into mere chatter about Shelly” (71). In a comment that reveals the depth of the nationalist mythmaking generated by the proponents of English literature, the Philosophy chair
stated that “an English School will grow up, nourishing our language not from the humanity of the Greeks and Romans, but from the savagery of the Goths and Anglo-Saxons. We are about to reverse the Renaissance” (qtd. in Baldick 74). That the highest echelons of learning subscribed to this mythical origins theory, albeit of a Greek orientation, should further serve to illustrate how mythologically based and unempirical, relative to a modern standard, the cultural logic of both pursuits, English and Classical, really were.

The Philosophy chair had good practical reason to disclaim English literature’s methods due to the disconnection between the idealistic proponents of English literature versus the practical application of those ideals. For example, the 1868 Taunton Commission’s presentation to Parliament had noted that the frequent recitation of famous literary passages in girls schools, but that “the critical study of a great work in its entirety is not attempted” (Baldick 74). The promising university extension lectures, besides “entertainment value”, had never developed a method of formal study and had “degenerated into gossip about the authors’ lives” (Palmer 110). In a sense, the proponents of English literature were so eager for Oxbridge to accept the English literature, because it was failing elsewhere without a solid pedagogical basis, relying instead upon its cultural ties to the upper class economic success. Optimism was becoming self-doubt and fear.

Some hope was paradoxically to be found in World War I. There is no doubt that WWI brought about the revolution in English criticism, maturing finally with Scrutiny in 1932, as it initially helped further establish English literature as an institutionalized, high academic discipline. The Government’s War Propaganda Bureau under minister C.F.G. Masterman had its own Literature and Arts Department (Palmer 108). At Cambridge, the new English professor, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch led the charge to exorcise the Germans from the department in a series
of lectures entitled “Patriotism in English Literature” (108). Perhaps truly indicative of this trend is Quiller-Couch’s laudable analogy between the Kaiser and Satan in a lecture on Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. George S. Gordon, Raleigh’s successor said, “war, which broke so many things, cannot be considered as wholly malignant in its consequences if it should prove to have broken our servility to the lower forms of German scholarship” (Gordon qtd. in Palmer 108).

In an attempt to reconcile the method-less nationalist agenda of the grassroots English literature group versus the acceptance of English literature as a scholarly discipline, the 1926 *Teaching of English in England by the Board of Education*, created by such patriots as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and Sir Henry Newbolt, acknowledges the nationalism effort and attempts to elevate the study of English literature as a permanent vanguard of English identity. The report claims that “we have no general national scheme of education; it is understood to be the duty of the state to see that every child shall, during a certain number of years, receive an education”, a claim which is a direct reference to Matthew Arnold’s theories (5). As if anticipating future literary historians’ reactions, the report then quotes Arnold, that a “system which disunites classes cannot be held worthy of the name of a national culture” (6). The report links the failure of a pervasive social mission of literature largely as a matter of practice: “we may recognize that it is at present more difficult than it was some centuries ago to educate the children of rich and poor side by side in the same schools” (6). It further notes that “education is still too remote from life”, so the likely panacea came in this axiom:

> education is not the same thing as information...it is guidance in the acquiring of experience...[the] most valuable for all purposes are those experiences of human relationships which are gained by contact with human being...[which] may take place in the intercourse of the classroom...and experience known to us under the form of [English] literature (8).
The issue of taste is also resurrected because if the child “is not learning good English, he is learning bad English, and probably bad habits of thought; and some of the mischief done may never afterwards be undone” (10). The report, in deference to the universities’ reluctance to accept the fledging discipline, acknowledges the cultural continuum of Greeks as “still the most life-giving and abundant source to which we trace our highest poetical and philosophical ideas...if we explore the course of English literature, if we consider from what sources its stream has sprung...we shall see that is has other advantages not to be found elsewhere” (13). All the streams of which have been “subdued to form a stream native to our own soil...that has become the native experience of men of our own race and culture” (13).

The report finally acknowledges that no form of literature can “take precedence of English Literature and that the two are so inextricably connected as to form the only basis possible” for a method of education;

therefore a liberal education for all English children whatever their position or occupation in life...education is greatest gift of the nation-state...that the common right to it, the common discipline and enjoyment of it, the common possession of the tastes and associations connected with it, would form a new element of national unity, linking together the mental life of all classes by experiences which have hitherto been the privilege of a limited section”; however, what they referred to was not common ‘taste’ but the culture of the middle class and aristocracy; clearly separates it from a material realm, in other words to be able to create class sympathy for the tastes of the privileged (15, my italics)

The close of the report is still Arnoldian with a touch of Smith: “if we use English literature as a means of contact with great minds, a channel by which to draw upon their experience with profit and delight, and a bond of sympathy between the members of a human society (16). No further analysis of the report is necessary to indicate that no less than three centuries later, from a disparate combination of grassroots interests and upper class hegemony, the rhetorical summation of all uses for the English language no less than legitimizes upper class “taste”,
symbolically intertwined with English literature, as well as continues in the same de-historical trends of the past three centuries.
Chapter VI
Conclusion: Imagined Communities

In *Finnegan's Wake*, James Joyce resurrects the mythology of Thomas Finnegan in order that the mundane and material elements of Dublin, from its inhabitants to its landscape, might regain a distinctively Irish history even if it were only a myth. Finnegan's fall, much like that of the attempt of English studies to define itself as an inherent part of the English cultural identity, superimposes his body on Ireland with a resulting normalized cultural situation of which a majority of its participants are quite unaware that anything had happened, except that a few more anthologies had been printed out and that the cultural elites had made a half-hearted attempt at education. The situation is rather that of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's subjects from the *Autumn of the Patriarch* who, upon approaching the imperial palace, realize that the ocean has disappeared with the death of the monarch. The result of the partnership of nationalism and literature, like the explanation of how the ocean disappeared, lies in a sort of mystical sleight of hand that has plagued the historical humanistic attachment, ever since Daniel Defoe clearly articulated it in *The Complete Gentleman* two centuries earlier.

However, before attempting a definitive conclusion, it is useful to define in general the ways in which literature, as a part of cultural identity, relates to the nationalism of a given nation-state; or, at the very least I will endeavor to define a conceptual framework of the cultural logic behind the institutionalization of English literature. Nationalism theorist Benedict Anderson states that “[national] communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson qtd. in Webb 11). In attempting to define the relationship between literature and a collective national identity, "imaginary" is a useful term to bear in mind largely because nationalism is not palpable or concrete but manifested in a codified system of signs and signifiers. As my research has
demonstrated, this system was and is heavily tied to values of taste and civilization in symbolic terms that were ubiquitous from professor to politician to aristocrat. Thus, the importance of discovering the ideologies behind such a prominent aspect of national culture as the study of literature is important since its potential influence can exist only in the non-material realm. I would argue further that any study of a national project such as the institutionalization of literature should immediately call into question the self-evident ability of those with power, knowledge, and political sanction to write the history of the entire nation as they would see fit. The ontological implications are frightening because along with the malleable history comes the accompanying legitimization of a national culture of exclusion and inclusion based upon the public and private reification of the myth.

Colonial theorist Franz Fanon complicates the idea of an imaginary culture with his maxim that “A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism...a national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thoughts to describe, justify and praise the action” that allowed them to control a nationalism’s identity (Fanon 188). He also warns of a danger that “by a kind of perverted logic, [nationalism] turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (210). Fanon’s comments reflect directly to the attempts of Arnold, Leavis, and, as to restate my previous point, “every critic associated with the early stages of the institutionalization of English literature” (Baldick 101). This cadre clung to its belief largely that the common “English-ness” of pre-industrial common culture had separated from itself due to the Industrial Revolution and only literature could possibly bridge the apparently artificial class distinctions. The irony occurs in that this literary culture, even at its most democratic promptings, when it was a genuine grassroots movement of
workers and a few women desiring to mimic the tastes of the upper class, was still a culture created by and for the maintenance of aristocratic taste; hence, Fanon’s “perverted logic”.

I have already mentioned Babha’s notion of mimicry in discussing English literature’s acceptance among the emerging middle class, but another aspect of imitation to consider is Antonio Gramsci’s notion that the “supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’” (Gramsci 3). Hence, if the intellectual class, as my research substantiates, truly did feel that religion had lost its role as an affective complement on the populace, then their moral leadership had few other viable public alternatives to create the sort of class sympathies that would maintain an imaginary community—other than English literature. Irish nationalist Seamus Heaney contributes the definition that “All nationalisms have a metaphysical dimension, for they are all driven by an ambition to realize their intrinsic essence in some specific and tangible form. The form may be a political structure or a literary tradition [or institution for teaching literature]” (8). In conjunction with Heaney’s definition I would also consider “unconscious” ambition, especially when considering that almost every major non-Marxist literary and social critic approached literature with an eye for maintaining the status quo as well as with a quasi-theological orientation.

At the extreme of this scenario, since the national identity is immaterial, one can gain a sense that subtle ideology might be used to control the uneducated masses as a form of hegemony. Raymond William’s theories of mass-communication are useful in this context. He states that “Communication [in the post-Victorian period] becomes a science of penetrating the mass mind and of registering an impact there...the whole theory of mass-communication depends, essentially, on a minority in some way exploiting a majority” (314). Williams qualifies his statement by asking: “what of the case where a minority is seeking to educate a majority for
that majority’s ultimate good...if men and women are growing up in ignorance when so much is known...they must be told this for their own sake” (315). However, in a society unused to democratic rules and structures, “the process of learning depends so much on the conscious need to learn, and such a need is not easily imposed on anyone”; especially, I would add, coded in the binaries of “civilized” and “vulgar” that promoters of English studies were employing (315).

Even though the institutions of literature may include a material university and material instructors, all cultural formations developed through pedagogy, academic discourse, and even the text itself is exist only in the immaterial. For example, Gauri Viswanathan quotes Tipu Sultan’s minister in India as saying “we are not afraid of what we do see of the British power, but of what we do not see” to illustrate the often hidden mechanisms of cultural transmission or domination (Viswanathan xi).

It is obvious that not only was the institutionalization of English literature far from arbitrary, but the creation of a national literature, Sarah Corse offers, was not either because “they [both] are an integral part of the process by which nation-states create themselves and distinguish themselves from other nations” (4). The symbolic channeling of English literatures and its corresponding institutionalizing methods of assigning value is still largely the goal of the twentieth century British English department. If a requisite text meets expectations then it is admitted to the National grouping depending on the author’s identity, which, I might add, has become increasingly complicated with emerging transnational authorships. It is true that “primary nation-building requires some measure of a campaign to create an “essential identity” will override or incorporate other primary identities, such as racial or religious identities, that may divide national populations” (Lloyd qtd. in Corse). Although Lloyd’s view may be a bit of an oversimplification, it is not by many degrees. Thus, an institution which emerges out of a
nationalistic impetus should be a “discursive structure that is not a merely a “cognitive” or “contemplative entity””; it is an articulatory practice which constitutes and organizes social relations” (Andersen qtd. in Webb 11).

Raymond Williams contributes this distinction: “if our purpose is art, education, the giving of information or opinion, our interpretation will be in terms of the rational and interested being. If, on the other hand, our purpose is manipulation—the persuasion of a large number of people to act, feel, think, know, in certain ways—the convenient formula will be that of the masses” (Williams 309). When considering the impact on national identity of literature “there is always a temptation to assume that reading plays as large a part in the lives of most people as it does in his [or her] own...to the degree that he acquires a substantial proportion of his ideas and feelings from what he reads he will assume, again wrongly, that the ideas and feelings of the majority will be similarly conditioned” (309). This is the sort of cultural logic that equates the study of literature to participatory nationalism in a self-interested, ahistorical design; a design much like the pairing of “taste” with gentleman. Another equally valid point Williams makes is that “the highest standards of literacy in contemporary society depend on a level of instruction and training far above that which is commonly available”, and is desirable by all I would add (309).

Thus, despite the functional categories by which literatures of different countries are grouped, the object of literature lost its potential for mass moral conversion after becoming an object of study at the university level. Equipped with no method and no training, the “masses” would be in no position to even begin to comprehend the subtleties required for scholarly study. In no society has higher education the capacity to accommodate and train all of its citizens at an equal level, and even if it did, as Williams rightly points out, how does a nation state create the
desire for such an education? Thus, the temptation to categorize the masses as vulgar in taste is coincident with the construction of a perceived “duty of defending a standard against the mob” (Williams 310). Britain was forced, in the previously outlined traditional uses of English literature, to rely upon an institutional orientation with a corresponding nationalizing and civilizing direction for the Indians, the masses, and the Scots, but not the university (Williams 310). Once it arrived at Oxbridge, English literature became an institutionalized object of study lost in the post-Arnoldian web of criticism and lacking a unified social meaning; however, this point is ancillary. My research demonstrates that the grassroots movement came as close as the study of English literature had been to shaping cultural identity. All the movement could accomplish was exposure and not morality or taste shaping because it never had anything in common, despite the assertions of the contrary, with the culture of the majority of England’s domestic citizens. No amount of historical amnesia could fully create the necessary cultural conditions and receptivity for a culture that was never shared. However, this pre-academic literary culture was closer to constituting a sense of English-ness than is possible in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

“It can just as easily be argued that the study of English and the growth of Empire proceeded from a single ideological climate and that the development of the one is intrinsically bound up with the development of the other, both at the level of simple utility (as propaganda for instance) and at the unconscious level, where it leads to the naturalizing of constructed values (e.g. civilization, humanity, etc.) which, conversely, established ‘savagery’, ‘native’, ‘primitive’, as their antitheses and as the object of a reforming zeal” (Ashcroft 2). It can also be argued that the bedfellows that the literate find themselves with at this extreme is eerily fascist: “theorists of racial degeneration—Galton, Nordau, Lombroso, Spengler—shared with literary critics and
poets and novelist the conviction that the decline of the West must be halted by some infusion of 
energy from an “unspoiled”, “organic” source” claims Heaney (Heaney 12). The question of 
significance again arises: where do these cultural extremes leave the relationship between 
English literature and nationalism?

The ultimate distinction to be maintained is that although literature can be said to express 
certain elements of national identity, any claim that it drastically influences everyone’s ideal of 
nationalism is erroneous. The conception that it could possess such a quality originates in a 
belief in the cultural and therefore racial supremacy of the English people with a select group of 
poets as their vanguard. To answer the immediate objection from the cultural right who would 
say that this argument is a slippery slope to decrying Western literary objects as imperialist and 
lacking any universal value, I would again reiterate this clear distinction between the object of 
literature and the institutions and cultures that define its use. Literature’s social mission, lacking 
an ultimate transcendental meaning or essential purpose was and is as malleable as critical 
practice. Although a student cannot read Miton’s Paradise Lost without coming away with some 
idea of a confrontation between God and Satan, the deeper and morally influencing 
understanding, as the Taunton Commission earlier noted the failure of simple recitation of 
canonical work, must come from “proper” teaching and study. Humanism in and of itself is not 
a imperialistic force unless, in the Arnoldian urge to stave off anarchy, it is used as sleight of 
hand historical revisionism and as an avoidance of dealing with material concerns such as the 
quality of the working class and the underlying logic for how they became so “vulgar”.

However, without a clearly defined social project, literature was and is doomed to be a 
part of nationalism like the pledge of allegiance is in America or a part of non-academic culture 
as memorizing Hamlet’s “To be...” speech in a high school classroom. When memorized by
many students, it assuredly registers in their national identity somewhere but not to the formative
degree imagined possible. The "civilizing" impulse is more of an idealistically inspired attempt
to create sympathy for upper class political stability. However, Britain's institutional focus still
clings to part of its imperial past, titling much of its literature, including literature produced
outside of England proper under the title "Commonwealth" literature. Is this merely incidental,
geographical, or a residual imperial attitude? Given the ease with which Britain has conceived of
literature as a colonializing tool both within the empire and without, my opinion tends towards
the new sort of cultural logic that mythologizes the "good old days" of Britain's great empire and
unified culture. In any case, the term "Commonwealth" literature still indicates the degree of
successfulness the grassroots national movements towards literature impacted English
literature's eventual university study.

My paper has sought to assess the historical and cultural factors that resulted in the
institutionalization of English literature and also to assess its relationship to an English national
identity. Although my conclusions have already been stipulated, this paper would be incomplete
without addressing the possible significance of my research for the department of English
literature in Britain, and, to a similar degree, in America. My primary purpose has been to
provide some much needed historical perspective to debates that have never been resolved since
language and then English literature became standardized and effectively nationalized in the
interests of the economic elite. Therefore, those English scholars who would cling so fiercely,
such as traditionalists Harold Bloom, to the notion that the English literary tradition is the "best
of what was thought" should recognize that in the face of the contingent nature of English

2My primary source reference is from Salman Rushdie's essay "Commonwealth" Literature does not exist". I
would point the American reader simply to the literature syllabi of colleges such as Oxford, Leeds, Cambridge, or
many other literature departments to confirm the pervasiveness of the term. Another excellent refutation of the term
is contained in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's article "On the Abolition of the English Department." See Works Cited.
studies, one should be careful in deciding which national identity is defined as best. Additionally, twenty-first century traditionalists should see themselves in the same position as those scholars at Oxford and Cambridge in the late Victorian period that were defending Greek and Latin texts against an incumbent, "vulgar" subject. Those who decried the emergence of literary and cultural theory such as Marxism, Feminism, Historicism, Structuralism, and a more general liberalization of humanistic literary theory should recognize humanism's contingency and far from self-evident roots. As the Classicists discovered, democratic impulses, property of the masses or of the masses mimicking the upper class, will eventually reach even the highest bastions of culture. Although I would never propose the sacrifice of critical freedom on the alter of mass social expediency, I would suggest that more scholarship needs to examine not only the social function of the study of the English literary object. Perhaps a unified approach to literature could be re-discovered, hopefully not within the same imperialistic or mythologically based vein, with less critical dissection and more genuinely egalitarian concerns. If the history I have documented should prove any precedent to follow, the masses must see social or practical relevance in order for any literary culture to be sustained at a national level; but, the culture must be historically and materially theirs and not simply a device of hegemonic control.
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