

Discipline and Knowledge Base: The Uses of the Historical Survey Course

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In the last four decades, the survey course in literary history has been gradually disappearing from the curriculum of English departments, to be replaced in most programs by distribution requirements. Two curriculum studies from the 1980s disclosed how quickly this trend was established: between 1985 and 1989 the percentage of departments offering a survey course declined from 70% to 50% (Harris; Lawrence). An MLA survey two years later in 1991–92 found again that about 50% of English departments required a survey course for the major (Lawrence; Huber; “Highlights”). I examined the Web sites of the top thirty-eight English programs according to *U.S. News and World Report*—not an infallible list, to be sure, but of some confirmatory value—and found that about a third of these programs required a survey course.¹ The decline of the survey course can be explained in part by the challenging format of the large lecture; but I suggest, in this essay, that there are other, less obvious reasons that need to be examined. I argue further that distribution requirements and a survey course do not accomplish the same ends.

What is lost when the survey course is retired? This is a question best understood in the context of what an MLA report to the Teagle Foundation calls a “knowledge base,” the foundational content of a discipline (*Report*). For the purposes of my argument, I define a discipline as an institutional arrangement for producing and transmitting knowledge. Disciplines have complex histories of formation, but to survive they need a departmental home in the university. There, the functions of producing and transmitting knowledge are realized in the institutional forms of research and teaching. These two forms of academic work are not equal. If the primary job of academics is teaching, the system of professional rewards reserves the highest compensation (reputation and salary) for success in research. At the same time, however, teaching retains a certain priority in the academic job market, which is determined ultimately by the choices of the undergraduate population. Only a small percentage of students majoring in humanities

fields go on to graduate study in their major subjects, a circumstance that has consequences for the construction of the curriculum. We cannot conceive the curriculum in a field such as English literature on the same principle as we do in preprofessional fields such as business or communication. The relation between the production and transmission of knowledge has to be thought in a different way.

For a number of reasons, the question of what should be taught in the undergraduate major in English has become increasingly difficult to answer. It has been possible, for example, to argue that it is more important for the curriculum to impart skills, such as the ability to read closely or to think critically, than to familiarize students with a literary tradition. It doesn't matter so much to the task of imparting such skills which texts are dedicated to this purpose. But even if skills are without question a component of what we mean by a knowledge base, it seems to me doubtful that a curriculum can be constructed primarily with the aim of transmitting skills. The problem of content cannot be gotten around so easily, because the study of literature has a history; the works that are taught have never been a random selection, though the selection has never been an unvarying constant either. Our discipline is irreducibly historical, and *literary history* names its content. How, then, are we to teach this content, and why have we found the literary historical survey course inadequate for this purpose?

In addition to the fact that our sense of what is most important in the literary tradition changes over time, the problem of content comes up against the even bigger problem of the sheer accumulation of literary works. Growth in absolute numbers defies transmission and imposes on the professoriat the necessity of constructing a curriculum based as much on the principle of exemplarity as on the principle of a hypothetically essential value, an indispensable literary tradition. The most telling symptom of this problem in the curriculum is the reduction in the number of required authors in many majors to the single figure of Shakespeare. It would appear that Shakespeare has been selected to represent the principle of essential value, the *sine qua non* of the curriculum, in order that the rest of the major can be freed up for other purposes. But no single author, not even Shakespeare, can legitimately realize this purpose. The relegation of Shakespeare to such a representative function reveals the attenuation of literary history as a necessary content of the knowledge base. In this situation, distribution requirements

work as a backfilling strategy, though very unsystematically. The courses fulfilling these requirements might be single-author, topical, or period, but no combination of them is likely to give students a sense of the development of language and literature over the *longue durée* of literary history.

Too many works are important, for too many reasons. Our anthologies get bigger, but semesters do not get longer. By default the literary tradition can be represented only by an exemplary selection of literary works, and as the rationale varies, so will the selection. If the task of constructing a curriculum has become by magnitudes more difficult, why not just abandon that task? In the face of this problem, it is not surprising that the professoriat should find it easier to organize the curriculum around a progression of skills that has the research practices of the literature professoriat as its implicit telos. Such a curriculum inevitably culminates in upper-level courses that are topical in conception and often closely related to the instructor's current research. The professoriat would like to believe that these topical courses are more popular with students, and sometimes they are (but perhaps the popularity depends also on the topics). The proliferation of topical courses in any case reinforces the preeminence of research in all professional contexts, including undergraduate teaching. Encouraged by administrators who share an equally high regard for research, the professoriat now expects students at advanced levels of major study also to do research, to engage in the production of new knowledge. But this laudable expectation raises the question of what students need to know in order to conduct research. Is the production of knowledge a matter of skills only, or does it also require the assimilation of a content in order to formulate questions for research? Manifestly, research and teaching are codependent in the graduate program, where the discipline reproduces the professoriat. If undergraduate majors are to become researchers (in itself, a desirable goal), it is all the more necessary that they acquire a knowledge base with content as well as skills, that they understand the historical stakes of any research agenda in the literary disciplines.

There is a peculiar mismatch, I suggest, between the desire to encourage research among undergraduate majors and the simultaneous retreat from literary history. We may think that requiring several courses before 1900 or even before 1800 takes care of this problem, but it only exposes the weakness of the backfilling strategy. These distribution

requirements already concede the contraction of the curriculum to the modern period as well as our failure to motivate students to refuse the path of least resistance, which always leads to the present. The result is that history is rolled up behind us like a carpet. The shrinking of the knowledge base undermines the aims of research too, which at its boldest and most important alters that base. The content of the knowledge base is in truth an artifact of research, but unfortunately this truth does not in itself yield a pragmatically useful conception of curricular content. In literary study, the knowledge base is both a set of skills and a set of texts, the latter organized first of all in a historical sequence. This organization of texts, the curriculum as such, embodies an accumulation of judgments about value, generates questions for research into theoretical and historical matters, and provides occasions for the development of skills specific to the discipline. The knowledge base changes, but slowly enough to function as a base. Like our understanding of history itself, the literary tradition resists change but never permanently; its interest resides in just the fact that our understanding of this body of texts changes.

In the simplest sense, a knowledge base is what makes research possible. But this formulation perhaps evades the problems associated with the very concept of knowledge, which is sometimes imagined as subject to infinite contestation. Is all knowledge really worth contesting, at any moment? In the literary disciplines, we are sometimes tempted to think of knowledge as contested at every level, even the most basic. But this is not really the case: much knowledge in any discipline consists in what has been more or less established, what no longer provokes dispute, even what counts as merely a matter of fact. The notion of fact is not trivial in this context. Facts that were once difficult to establish tend to move outside the field of contestation, becoming elements of the knowledge base. Like most disciplines, literary disciplines contain an enormous accumulation of facts, enormous even at their most atomic level of names and dates. There are facts about many different matters: the number of lines in a sonnet, the two publication formats of *Paradise Lost*, the contemporary occasion of Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade," and on and on. Some facts may be incontestable because sublimely arbitrary, such as the number of lines in a sonnet; but some can be assembled into structures of relations that rapidly become very complex, that give rise to questions for research and finally to interpretive hypotheses. We need to know some facts about the

Crimean War, for example, in order to understand why Tennyson wrote this poem, why it was so popular, what relation a national poet might have to the newspaper accounts of the war, and what role a national poet such as Tennyson, or poetry itself, had in the history of British imperialism. . . . We would not become interested in any of these questions if we were not in possession of certain facts or had not made a decision to read Tennyson's poem or to credit it with some kind of value. The opening onto a question of research—Tennyson's relation to the Crimean War—depends on our beginning at the lowest rung of the discipline, in the rag-and-bone shop of the mere fact. Even a sophisticated skepticism about the conditions for the production and recognition of facts must begin with facts. We touch base with the knowledge base when we recognize the origin of the circular arc that connects the knowledge base to the stratospheric heights of research and in turn connects research to changes in the knowledge base.

It is perhaps only the epistemological anxiety characteristic of humanities disciplines that induces skepticism about facticity, thus undermining on false theoretical grounds the rationale for the literary historical survey. By contrast, the sciences make no apology for introductory level courses, which are often loaded with facts that have to be laboriously committed to memory. Science courses defer the pleasure, for students, of participating in the creation of new knowledge. This is not to say, let us admit, that these courses are always taught well. But calculus, organic chemistry, anatomy, and many other introductory or base-level courses in the sciences cannot be skipped or relegated to the category of optional or elective study. They must be taken before students can proceed to the frontier of research.

We are fortunate in the humanities in that our knowledge base offers the same pleasurable literary works as those at the top end of the curriculum, however differently presented these works might be in the introductory or survey format. Our knowledge base is inherently pleasurable. And yet our so-called service courses have over time come to be regarded with something of the same distaste that many premed students have for organic chemistry. Teaching these courses is sometimes regarded as an onerous task, to be compensated by those plummy topical courses at the upper level of the curriculum, which are often based on our research and permit us to share the excitement of it with our students. This is the institutional situation in relation to which we might understand the

decline of the survey course. Further complicating this situation, courses satisfying distribution requirements are usually nothing other than upper-level topical courses. Our curriculum moves abruptly from one or two skills-oriented introductory courses to that higher tier. Whatever other reasons we might cite for the decline of the survey course, it tracks the shift in the orientation of the curriculum to the current research of the professoriat and to the topical courses that showcase this research. There is nothing inherently objectionable, let me add, in topical courses that emerge from current research. On the whole, I think that the curriculum has been improved by these courses, which can indeed be attractive for teachers and students alike. But our responsibility as teachers to our discipline entails our establishing a balance between the transmission of the knowledge base and the creation of new knowledge. If the survey course is designed mainly to transmit the knowledge base, it need not be offered to our students like stale bread. The challenge of teaching it arises not from an intrinsic lack of interest in literary historical issues but from the difficulty of devising the right pedagogy.

This pedagogy must convey fact, or information, but such basic material need not be tedious—it is crucial, after all, to any sophisticated understanding of how to read literary works and how to create new knowledge about literature. Learning mere facts is disparaged now as rote, and rightly so, but the repudiation of fact also betrays the epistemic trauma of our discipline's history, its difficulty in establishing literary study as a testable form of knowledge. We only have to look at the record of tests for students of a century ago to see how mindless such knowledge once was, how desperately the literary professoriat clung to the mere fact as a means of asserting knowledge in the discipline. We no longer burden our students with having to memorize mindlessly, no longer ask them to know the birth dates and death dates of authors, and with good reason. But at the same time, we know that our students often have a very shaky grasp of the most basic historical chronology and even misplace the century in which an author was active—even, in my experience, Shakespeare. Chronology, which might be considered the base of the knowledge base, rapidly increases in importance in any understanding of the history of literature and begins to look more like a load-bearing structure on which we have no choice but to build the edifice of literary history, the content of the historical survey course.

The monadic character of mere facts makes them seem equivalent and featureless, like single bricks, to continue with my analogy—without which there can be no structure. But in order to advance our understanding of the knowledge base, we must discard this metaphor and recognize that the structures in question are dynamic. As they move through time, they are disassembled and reassembled into new formations, what we call works, genres, movements, periods. They bring together numerous large and small facts, but it is the relations among the facts that define their interest. It is by no means easy to describe these relations, which are themselves used to build even larger structures, interpretations that aim to produce understanding. Information, facts, are meaningful only in relation to other elements of articulated structures in a continuous process of composition and decomposition and recomposition. If this language sounds too abstract, the process I describe acquires immediate concreteness in the context of any particular problem in literary history, such as the development of the novel. Names, dates, biographical and historical events, changes in vernacular language, the transformation of reading practices, the development of new class formations—all these bundles of atomic or molecular facts enter into the history of the form of the novel as components of the novel's emergence and evolution. The dynamic transformation of these structures of relation is indeed so complex that even the smallest facts, such as dates, can be sublated into interpretive structures, can become important. For this reason, chronology does not fall below the level of interpretation; on the contrary, it constitutes a baseline, an order of fact that interpretation cannot violate. This is the enabling condition for literary history.

Turning now to the content of the course in literary history, I suggest that the syllabus of such a course need not be understood as a succession of masterpieces or as the transmission of a canon. A syllabus is not the same thing as a canon, in the first place because no survey can pretend either to offer what is definitively canonical or to include all such texts; in the second place, and really more important, the historical survey is nothing other than a theory of how to relate exemplary works to one another and to the historical surround. It is the interface between literature and history, and it provides the knowledge base for historical inquiries at the top end of the curriculum. Unlike upper-level topical courses, however historical their content, the survey course must engage literary and historical change over a *longue durée*. The longer rhythms of change, if also

punctuated sometimes by revolutionary moments of rapid transformation, are not always visible in the short span of time in a period or topical course. The first use of the historical survey is thus to bring these long durational changes into visibility for students, to establish a diachronic knowledge base for the discipline. The survey course establishes a time line, an artifact of historical understanding. The time line may be full of gaps, but these gaps are opportunities for further study, for discovery.

A second use of the literary historical survey is to bring into visibility the most important signal of long durational change: language. The relation between language and literature is of course a long-standing topic of research. Our literary disciplines began as language disciplines, and literature was a component of language study, but this relation has been reversed in the years since the MLA's inception. When we take the measure of changes in language, we see language in a way that it is not seen when the object of study is located with reference only to a brief span of time. Without a long durational perspective, we fail to see language at all—or we bypass it in favor of the representational function of literature, which offers to give us access to the historical moment. But in grasping the contemporary context of representation, we miss many signals of change that are disclosed over the longer term. The diachronic vantage points us to the circumstance, for example, that neologism was extraordinarily abundant in the Renaissance but universally disparaged in the eighteenth century. Such linguistic changes track and reinforce literary and cultural processes that seem to be more momentous in significance. My point here is that the survey course can bring literature back into a relation to language that is historically revelatory.

A third use of the survey course is to make genre visible in a way that it cannot be in a short span of time. The intelligibility of genre concepts is disclosed over the long term. Again, the history of the novel provides a serviceable example. Although the novel emerged and developed rapidly over the course of just one century, it would be a mistake to suppose—and few scholars would believe—that this emergence and development can be understood within the enclosure of that time frame. The inception of the novel form has obvious relations to other genres, both those crowded to the margin by the novel and those pulled into the orbit of its attraction. To see the novel in the system of changing relations among genres, we need to see that system in its dynamic—that is, diachronic—

aspects. Beyond that, we need to see genre itself as a formation of the *longue durée*. The great divide between serious and popular forms of art in the twentieth century, for example, brought the genre system to an end for serious art. We have the serious novel, for example, which has no generic designator other than its high cultural status, while in the domain of mass consumption novel genres have proliferated wildly. There, they rigidly determine content and form. Bookstores respond to this condition typically by segregating literature, defined by its serious self-description, from genre fiction (e.g., mystery fiction, romance fiction, spy fiction, science fiction, young adult fiction). These mutations of the genre system need to be understood in relation to the long history of literary forms, of writing as a medium, within which literature has been redefined, for better or worse, as a high cultural form.

A fourth use of the survey course is to bring into visibility the phenomenon of intertextuality, which has in my experience been disappearing from our students' literary experience. Intertextuality is conspicuously foregrounded in much modernist literature, as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, but it is prevalent in all periods. It is very difficult to teach Pope's "Rape of the Lock" to students who have not read *Paradise Lost*: they do not see what game Pope is playing. In a different way, Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* annexes the whole of Shakespeare's play in its employment of intertextuality and demands that its readers bring the pretext into continuous juxtaposition with its successor. Some works can only be understood intertextually, but nearly all literature presupposes the relevance of pretexts and intertexts.

As a literary strategy that comes into inevitable prominence with the survey course, intertextuality engages different spans of time and exhibits the variety of ways in which literary works relate to one another over these spans. That the sheer volume of literary works makes appreciation of this strategy difficult is an argument for, not against, the survey course. The importance of intertextuality in the domain of the arts generally is confirmed by its ubiquity in film, which has a history short enough to make appreciation of the strategy easier for film students than for students of literature. I have always found that students take manifest pleasure in identifying allusions in films; and of course, allusions are not restricted to relations within just one medium. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is an important pretext for *Forbidden Planet*, one of the more significant science

fiction films in cinematic history. Our students' interest in cinematic allusion tells us what this interpretive practice should be like in the study of literature: a distinct pleasure, a delightful shock of recognition. But the pleasure of this game is much diminished when their knowledge of literary history is tenuous and incoherent, when the pretext can only be conjured by summarizing a work no one has read.

A fifth use of the survey course is in laying the basis for studying periods of literature, since this category structures both teaching and research. The shortcoming of the period course here is not difficult to identify: periods tend to be defined against what comes before and after. The relation to what comes before is often agonistic, as in Dryden's critique of the barbarism of Shakespeare's age or Wordsworth and Coleridge's critique of neoclassical didacticism. These are of course the oldest chestnuts of literary history, and they are often acknowledged with some unease before the instructor moves on to more interesting matters. From the perspective of period specialization, the preceding century or period appears as a radically foreshortened horizon, the features of which are oversimplified. Ask medievalists what they think of how Renaissance scholars sometimes characterize the Middle Ages. The potted histories that enable us to burrow into our period specializations are dubious, and they certainly should not be passed on to our students uncritically. However truncated our presentation of literary history in the survey course, the course at least has the advantage of giving us the opportunity to complicate period concepts, to recognize their artificiality and retroactive construction.

I offer a final use of the survey course, which has emerged only recently. We are on the cusp at present of a new phase or technique of scholarly research, which goes by the name of digital humanities. Massive textual corpora are becoming available for quantitative analysis for the first time. In my view, this research has confirmed long-standing hypotheses more than it has overthrown them, but this is not to say that we won't see surprising results in the near future. What impresses me about digital analysis is that it is raising interesting questions about literary history. Thus far, digital researchers have fixed mainly on questions of genre (as Franco Moretti and the Stanford Literary Lab do), but there are many other types of questions that emerge from long durational literary history. These questions will need to be formulated for quantitative research projects to become truly revelatory, and much work will be required to translate them into programs

for machine reading. That will not happen unless we begin to train our students more effectively in literary history, some of whom will go on in graduate programs to become specialists in digital research. We will know that this research is succeeding only when we begin to rewrite our literary histories, when the knowledge base we impart to all our majors in literature incorporates the findings of this research. What we can say certainly now is that the questions addressed by digital technology are most interesting when the corpora belong to a longer time line, when there is a greater accumulation of text to consider. Current work in the field is limited by the number of texts digitized, but larger corpora will become available in the future. In the meantime, the new technology has returned us to the old literary history, with the possibility of enriching that field by employing new techniques of long durational study.

I cannot say whether the digital humanities will bring the historical survey course back to the forefront of our knowledge base, but surely this would be a desirable outcome—for both the digital project and the discipline. For that reason, I do not believe that my arguments on behalf of the survey course put me on the wrong side of history. On the contrary, I believe that they put me, very simply, on the *side* of history.

Note

1. I thank my research assistant, Ari Liberman, who did the major part of this search.

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