The teacher’s and the student’s plight with literature as it is being taught in colleges and universities today is discussed. Neither answers nor solutions are suggested. Instead problems that stem from the following situations are examined: (1) the heterogeneous population of undergraduate English classes, (2) the lack of a clear definition of what English is, (3) the student’s lack of interest in the literature and life of past ages, and (4) the student’s concern with communication and insistence that literature relate to his present life and needs. (BN)
What's Wrong With Our Teaching Of English?

To those of us who teach English and who reflect, however briefly, on the success of our teaching and the nature of our students, one truth is clear. Somehow we are failing. The reasons for this failure are less clear, but the fact of the failure itself is lucidly evident. Occasionally one meets or hears about a bright young college teacher of English who enthralls his students and whose students adore him. And one says, how nice, how extraordinary, how fine! But as I stand at the head of my classes, I see more usual attitudes reflected in facial expressions of boredom, apathy, gloom, despair, and even horror. Perhaps these moods are nothing more than evidence of my own poor teaching, but I think not; they reflect, instead, the whole mood and tone of the modern student's plight with English literature as it is being taught in colleges and universities across the nation.

As I said, the reasons for our failure are blurry and elusive—anything but obvious. Almost any single explanation seems unbearably reductionistic and wrapped in greater complexity. And while "a number of factors—historical, literary, educational, and pedagogic" appears the more satisfactory answer, these, too, seem to miss the point, to evade the larger implications of the failure.

One could argue, for example, that departments of English today boast more majors than almost any field. At Harvard, English, History, and Social Relations are the most "popular" subjects—if one counts heads. But surely, the reasons for the apparent popularity of English go far beyond love of learning, of literature, or commitment to the profession of letters. Undergraduates choose English for numerous reasons other than the subject itself. English is easy and general, requires no special vocabulary or set of difficult symbols, and is adequate...
preparation for careers in business, law, the State Department, finance, social work, journalism, the Peace Corps, and on and on as far as movie-making, sailing yachts, and managing chains of Italian pizzerias. Moreover, one can always think of something to say about Hamlet, even if one hasn’t read the play, and in how many other majors (try physics, biochemistry, or Ancient Greek to start with) can you get away with that? Further, anyone with a modicum of intelligence can read his native tongue, and if the student can’t understand Chaucer or Shakespeare, let him read Faulkner or Hemingway, and if he can’t do that, let him write poetry or sell pretzels: English faculty members are not infrequently the most tolerant of professors, and more usually than not, anything goes. In brief, English is a gut.

NOT SO, the serious student replies, if you wish to do well; if you seek distinction, a summa cum laude, or other accolades (like getting into a top graduate school). And here is where the trouble—the reasons for the failure—of explanation begins. Perhaps no other academic area is so besieged with heterogeneity of backgrounds, talents, and ambitions. This raises for every teacher of college English the question, to whom do I cater? Often the teacher is unable or unprepared to instruct his best students, but in universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, where teachers of English are often distinguished critics and scholars in their own right, the problem of the teacher’s ability to instruct and delight would seem not to exist. But it does. For the student replies, once again, “distinguished” in what sense? If X or Y is an international authority on Donne or Pope, this doesn’t mean he can teach. Instruct us maybe, but not delight us. For we are not interested in Donne or Pope, and his status as a respected authority on these authors does not imply that he communicates to us his own excited sense of their importance.

If the student’s line of argument were to end at this point, the solution would be simple simon: let all Donne and Pope scholars communicate excitement! But the student, if you listen to him, has only begun, and his questions of relevance are to follow. Stated baldly, his case goes like this: I don’t really care about John Donne or Alexander Pope, one a melancholic divine, the other a Catholic cripple; I’m not really interested in Donne’s world or Pope’s society; their poems aren’t aesthetically pleasing in the way that those of Yeats and Eliot are; in short, I read them only because they are assigned. The same would probably be said of Spenser, Jonson, Herbert, Crashaw, Milton, James Thomson, and tens of other pre-Romantic poets, to say nothing of prose writers. Donne and Pope, in addition, have little or no relevance to careers in business, law, and film-making. The fact that Professor X is president of the Pope Society of America is not only unimpressive, it is downright proof of pedantry—that he spends his time collecting footnotes (I was tempted to say fossils, repeating the charge of a former student).

If Donne and Pope won’t illuminate my life, I don’t want them: If their poetry cannot help solve my identity crisis—as can Hamlet, when taught by the “right” man, not the president of the Shakespeare Scholars—I won’t read them for love, but out of a sense of obedience. So goes the argument of the nineteen-year-old.

The frightening aspect of the problem is that Donne and Pope (no more than most other poets before 1800, roughly) probably cannot help solve typical identity crises, cannot become “relevant.” And further, that nineteen-year-olds will continue to experience identity crises, among other things. We can no more expect undergraduates to give up their identity crises than expect Dearborn to stop producing Fords. It is a fact of life.

Then either make Donne and Pope “relevant,” the intelligent student implores, or chuck them by the wayside. The professor explains that the world of Donne’s poetry and prose was vastly remote from our own, that Augustan England was radically different from America in 1968 and finally, that however much he wishes it were otherwise, Donne’s religious problems and Pope’s moral ones are epochs away from Vietnam, LSD, and the Sexual Revolution; that the student must develop some historical imagination to understand these authors, and must understand what their words meant. All this while, nagging at the back of
his mind, is the student’s initial question—why are Donne and Pope relevant to me and my life at this time?

It is probable that the student himself does not comprehend all the ramifications of his question. Though he probably enjoys a greater awareness of the problem than does his teacher (whose own identity crises probably occurred several decades ago), he is still groping. In today’s scientific and technological world, the student of English inevitably feels queasy about his area of concentration, its vague perimeters and undefined regions. Problems in mathematics and physics have objective answers; English has none. The problems themselves are problematic in the study of literature. He is surrounded by specialists of every variety and wonders why he is not a specialist. Not that he wishes to become one, but in numbers and majorities there lies strength. Surrounded by a fast-moving world in which facts of every sort are essential, he can barely remember 1066 and 1798. The facts of his field he considers useless, especially when they describe Shakespeare’s bathtub, but he sees his scientific comrades busily searching for more and more facts, more and more data, and the queasiness returns. He comforts himself with the knowledge that English 100 won’t last forever, but the insecurity still persists. Form and function, form and content, style and sense—these claptraps of jargon no longer enthrall him, as they once did, nor can they excite him as his psychologist roommate is excited by recent research in brain theory, dreams, and the physiology of memory. Underneath he wishes he were something other than “an English concentrator,” but he doesn’t know what, and doubts that he could do something important—like nuclear physics or topology. He is the only amateur among experts. Even the worst history majors have vaster knowledge than he, are greater specialists than he. He doubts that he can recite more than twenty lines by heart, and he isn’t sure which century Donne lived in. English may offer him heart, and he isn’t sure which century can recite more than twenty lines by specialists than he. He doubts that he vaster knowledge than he, are greater even the worst history majors have the only amateur among experts. Even the worst history majors have more and more facts, “more and more scientific comrades busily searching for ever searching for new ones. The new ideas please. Were we to “put back” ideas into literature, the situation might well improve; but even here I am skeptical, since few modern men can deny that brain theory is more interesting than the New Science of Bacon or Restoration politics. This is to say nothing of the dull drudgery of graduate school in English, which under graduates hear about from the day they sign their concentration cards. That this is untrue is irrelevant: the point is, they think it is true. They hear about the least rewarding aspects only: counting caesuras in Chapman, or compiling bibliographies about Trollope’s brothers. From the academic grapevine they hear that fellowships there are niggardly compared to the sciences, that one goes into debt, that no employer wants a kid with a degree in English, that the average number of years it takes to get an advanced degree is astronomical, that afterwards, life is publish or perish. Under this grave weight the undergraduate collapses—understandably. If this isn’t enough to upset him, the Vietnam war torments him, prevents him from discovering himself at his own pace. He lingers between Donne scholars and draft officials, trapped and doomed.

More subtle is his distrust of the kind of knowledge critics and scholars have. If he abhors the Shakespeare’s-bathtub approach to literature, he is even less tolerant of the vague and abstract generalizations (his colleagues and teachers. He knows inwardly that he can confuse better “cepts,” though they have no relation to the facts. While his friends are breaking the barriers of knowledge by studying the contents of electron and helping cure cancer, he is the last Renaissance Man—contemplating life and death. But he knows that the Renaissance is dead and that he, consequently, is something of a fraud: if this specialized society one asks the cardiologist about the heart, and so on down the line, and no one asks him about anything—because he knows nothing (not even himself). He has heard mention of the great literary industries—the Yale Walpole and Boswell, the Columbia Milton, the California Dryden, the Wesleyan Fielding, and now the Iowa Smollet—but he doesn’t really understand what these are all about: he thinks of them as so many more bathtubs, and just imagine devoting a lifetime to the study of Horace Walpole or James Boswell? A man may have read all n million of Walpole’s letters and still misunderstand himself. The paradox is between meaningless facts and non-useful abstractions: science, he thinks, is a clear-cut case of right and wrong answers, a discipline where facts alone are significant. All this adds to his onus and sense of guilt.

But there is something else too. Students of English, today perhaps more than ever, have a deep intuitive sense that the humanities are dead. If not positively dead, at least dying. They consider departments of English to be the last strongholds of the older humanism. Indeed they wish, like Matthew Arnold, they held on to the older humanism. Indeed, the history of the teaching of English literature in this country from 1930 to the present is largely responsible for his unhappiness. Since then, high-school teaching of English has deteriorated—one proof being the very small number of entering college freshmen who indicate English as their chosen field of study: math is made more attractive to them. On the college level, the New Criticism (methods taught by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren) removed the ideas from literature and left it with form only. The old standby, “form and content,” was reduced to form alone. College students today cannot be sufficiently aroused by form bereft of ideas. Their world teems with ideas; they are forever searching for new ones. The new idea pleases. Were we to “put back” ideas into literature, the situation might well improve; but even here I am skeptical, since few modern men can deny that brain theory is more interesting than the New Science of Bacon or Restoration politics. This is to say nothing of the dull drudgery of graduate school in English, which undergraduates hear about from the day they sign their concentration cards. That this is untrue is irrelevant: the point is, they think it is true. They hear about the least rewarding aspects only: counting caesuras in Chapman, or compiling bibliographies about Trollope’s brothers. From the academic grapevine they hear that fellowships there are niggardly compared to the sciences, that one goes into debt, that no employer wants a kid with a degree in English, that the average number of years it takes to get an advanced degree is astronomical, that afterwards, life is publish or perish. Under this grave weight the undergraduate collapses—understandably. If this isn’t enough to upset him, the Vietnam war torments him, prevents him from discovering himself at his own pace. He lingers between Donne scholars and draft officials, trapped and doomed.

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street. But that they have a trade—and here is the point—a trade that is spec-
sensitive to a literary work may be
A curious thing is that little of this
true of graduate students. They are,
first place because they could edit Pope's manuscripts; that their sensi-
the Age of Specialization, were hired
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proof to the student that the
humanities are dead. One need examine nothing more than the word hu-
man or humane about folios, manus-
scripts, or the history of ideas—the argument goes. The only solace is that
Classics is even deader. To the college
student, the writing is on the wall: the best talent is being attracted to the
sciences and it isn't even clear today
just what the study of English should be. There has been no prophet to turn
the tide since the New Critics. All is
one wasteland; "Universal darkness
buries all." And he himself a failure.
Clearly, undergraduates are no
more oppressed by the metaphysics of John Donne than by the
esoteric paraphernalia of other disciplines. The sense of vanished relevance
is a perennial source of anxiety for teachers of everything. Every-
where. But the myth that English is
the last stronghold, the last outpost,
of the humanities still persists: the
point is not that English actually is
more painful than, say, chemistry, bi-
ology, or Ancient Greek history, but
that it ought not be painful at all.
Undergraduates expect English to be
general, beautiful, vague, delightful,
ever treating the large, the powerful and the important. Somewhere in the
recess of their mind's eye they harbor
the Arnoldian belief that English
should search for "ever fresh knowl-
edge." And they are dizzily bored
and made weary by the study of para-
phernalia that is unable to produce
one ounce of fresh knowledge. All the
trouble lies in the simple fact that stu-
dents of English expect this subject
to transcend the pettiness of others.
Because the undergraduate studying
English considers himself in some sense a "contemporary humanist"—as
much as this is possible today—his real
concern is with communication. As I
lecture on Donne and Pope I cannot
help but sense the students' uneasi-
ness: their faces say, Donne and Pope
are irrelevant to the new communica-
tion, and by this we do not mean
crass, uncherished aural-visual-physi-
cal-sensation, or the cult of hyper-
stimuli, but rather the common truth
of Rhinoceros, Blow-up, and Marshall
McLuhan. One very brilliant under-
graduate at Harvard wrote me: "Un-
deceive us! Let the English Depart-
ment abjure its unmerited aura of
'popularity,' and live with its own
abysmal truth: then, counting the
rings of Shakespeare's bathtub with
precision would be no less honorable
than measuring those of Newton's. Do
not let us enroll our college years in
the hopeless pursuit of a humanism
that is no longer to be found in litera-
ture. Give us the new communication
without false pretenses."
A curious thing is that little of this
is true of graduate students. They are,
of course, "committed," older, and
more sophisticated; and they usually
have chosen the teaching of English as
a profession. Unlike undergraduates,
they deplore generalities. Thoroughly
professional and resigned to the foot-
noted aspect of their chosen vocation,
they desire the very opposite: bath-
tubs and sinks are welcome, particu-
larly since these help pave the way for
the graduate student's own publica-
tions. The fact that the Yale Walpole
has reached volume 37 is of some im-
portance and of tremendous interest to
all: the graduate student greedily
dreams of the Lehigh Longfellow or
the Skidmore Skelton. There is no
limit to his professional possibilities
in a world where education has be-
come a major industry and the teach-
ing of English a commodity for many
consumers. He even dreams of a Nobel
given someday for "the Texas Twain."
But there, still lurking and searching,
nineteen and probably neurotic, in the
midst of the seeming chaos, is the
brooding undergraduate, more intel-
ligent, more demanding than ever
before.
Since we are his teachers, his
problems must in some sense be
ours. It would, however, be disingen-
ious of me to pretend that I have the
solutions. I have no answers, and at

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best, hope for some awareness of the profundity of the problem. I write this not to pose solutions but to comprehend circumstances—expressions of ennui and intellectual fatigue. I am a historical scholar, thoroughly persuaded that the combination of teaching and engaging in research in my field makes me content. Concerned with facts and ideas as well as the shape and tone of literary forms, I make no pretensions to revolutionize the study of literature. At the beginning of each new term I tell my undergraduate students not to expect miracles or prophecies: I am not Cassandra; I tell them that I am basically a pedant, and that they should expect no more than intelligent footnotes on the literary works they are reading. That the tenor of my mind is far closer to the scientist's than to that of certain incomprehensible and irrational critics of literature. That I feel defensive towards graduate students of English only, not to third-year Ph.D. candidates or professional colleagues. That I wish the commodity I sell could be consumed with greater ease; despite the wish I am aware of the problem of relevance. Finally, that the subject, English literature from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, must stand on its two feet if it is to remain an area of vital interest to hordes of undergraduates. That I shall not attempt to transform myself, Proteus-like, into a god, substituting, as it were, myself for the subject. "The style is nothing less than the man himself" is a romantic notion coined over two hundred years ago by Buffon as applicable to literary texts only. It should not serve as a teacher's manual for classroom conduct. Nor will I pervert the works themselves—Donne and Pope—to make them palatable. Pope must be read as Pope and not as Faulkner, or as Faulkner may have read and interpreted Pope. I know that if my menu contained more Faulkner and less Pope, more T. S. Eliot and less Donne, that the grimaces would be less severe, the intellectual fatigue less stringent, but like the majority of my colleagues I still believe—perhaps blindly—that the record of the past is valuable; that literature of long ago is the record of man's past sufferings, and as such, delights and instructs us for our own lives. That the greatest literature I know is ethical and didactic, moral and religious, not realistic and titillating. Literature is not life.

All this I tell my students, but with the knowledge that somehow, somewhere, some aspect of the communication itself is barren. Somehow they still wish literature to be life: their own life. In this country, where Youth is glamorized and idealized more than in any other country in the world, it is not strange that English literature hundreds of years old should be lacking the vital aspects of life that so greatly concern modern youth. And thus I whisper again and again to them: I understand, I understand. To my older and perhaps more sober audiences, to my colleagues, I turn about and roar, English literature must somehow become revitalized and rehabilitated, if we, the educators, the interpreters to the young, are to maintain our integrity and honestly earn our bed and board.