administrators should do what we can to enable our students to access similar funds, teachers, and programs. This seemingly circuitous route is, to my mind, the best route to first-class “English” research and teaching in Taiwan. English itself has migrated in importance from Britain to North America and to former or present Commonwealth regions all the while remaining such a globally important tongue, and we can give our students and the larger community needed and useful linguistic competence by focusing narrowly on English language and perhaps a bit of literature. But for students interested in the literary (and from literature to the humanities in general) intending to become teachers, scholars, and writers, we must really teach in depth the British literary tradition, and to do so we must also bring in the languages and traditions of Europe (and indeed most of the world!). As I said, I think the future of English Studies is Comparative Literature, and this is or should be as true in Taiwan at our universities as it was for me in the United States at Yale.

Confessions of an Unrepentant Non-Comparativist

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I obtained my Ph.D. from the English Department at the University of Chicago, where in the early 1990s Comparative Literature registered only vaguely as a backward field preoccupied with European structuralism and, like linguistics, filled with foreign students who eventually went home. So it is with some irony that I ended up in Taiwan, surrounded by linguists and comparativists, who, as it turns out, are better positioned than me to capitalize on the various turns that have relocated Comp Lit from ivory-tower margin to global cutting edge. Cultural Studies, World Literature, identity, diaspora, postcolonial, transnational, area studies: all have transformed literary studies abroad, boding well for those here with comparativist credentials.

Trained as a 19C Americanist, however, I have remained focused on research in that field. While broadening my teaching to include film and African American literature, I have also avoided tapping students’ natural disposition toward the present, the local, and the self that makes postcolonial and Asian American so appealing in the classroom. If I concede anything to pedagogical context, it is to frame early American writing as that of a country struggling, like Taiwan, to navigate the unfamiliar waters of liberal democracy and market capitalism, all beneath the cloud of a larger power from which it sought, with some ambivalence, political and cultural independence. What I like to call Comp Lite serves not as a coherent analytic, then, but as a means to de-alienate an archive that Americans themselves find obscure. So, while I acknowledge the rising view that early American literature also provides grounds for comparative studies, I continue to treat it in largely delimited national terms.

There are several reasons for this, some personal and some stemming from current
conditions in Taiwanese English departments, which are experiencing a decline in public confidence and government funding similar to the West, albeit not as advanced.

First, and most obvious, I have no comparativist credentials whatsoever. Beyond the problem of retooling in an environment where faculty are already thinly stretched, Lynn Hunt warned years ago that, exciting as it is, crossing disciplinary frontiers carries significant risks, both in being foreign in someone else’s domain, and in becoming exotic in one’s own. As a historian who bore as much grief from others in her field as from the art historians and literary critics whose methods she appropriated, Hunt uses a social metaphor for interdisciplinary practice (migration across national borders) rather than a typically mechanical one (the permeability of disciplinary boundaries) that erases the social in academic exchange. Disciplinary identity is important in the humanities, where desire for the material justifications of science produces certainties less empirical than moral. Tourists (such as Hunt) threaten not only territorial, but tribal integrity, with risks at once social and theocratic. At a time of mobility across cultural as well as disciplinary borders—a time, that is, when Hunt’s migration metaphor is as much descriptive as metaphoric—Comparative Literature promises systematic means to manage these risks. Experience leads me to doubt this promise, however, at least where mobility includes academic labor, and migration is not metaphoric at all, but a social and geographic fact. As a white man employed to profess value in someone else’s (postcolonial) domain, I take my cue from that most renowned of early Americanists, Benjamin Franklin, who counseled prudence in all things.

Second, it is increasingly unnecessary for scholars of British, American, and other English language literatures to make a separate peace with local circumstances. It is possible, in other words, to succeed in Taiwan without retooling or lowering standards. This was not always the case. When I came, in 1997, National Central University (NCU) barely had email, never mind high-speed internet. Library resources were thin, books hard to obtain, and staff non-professional.

While research received plenty of lip service, little was actually done, and what was done was often self-published. Teaching was heavy and heavily weighted toward language instruction. Also daunting were service requirements, especially for Taiwanese faculty, who had to bear the extra burden of duties that foreign staff could not perform. For young professors, there was nothing remotely like the systems of mentoring and accountability that usher western faculty through the perils of professionalization.

While teaching loads remain stubbornly high—and salaries stubbornly low—conditions have improved. Ministry of Education and National Science Council funding has helped to expand library holdings, including the purchase of databases (MUSE, JSTOR) that place faculty on a more competitive footing with those at research universities abroad. The growth of resources online has also helped level the global playing field, especially for those who require access to foreign archives. Indeed, scholarship by a better prepared and more ambitious generation of research faculty has raised the international profile of foreign literature departments in the last decade, creating conditions at home that help to alleviate the problems of mentoring and peer review. Students too have improved, in language and confidence, making compulsory language classes unnecessary. The result at NCU has been an undergraduate curriculum not unlike that taught in the schools where faculty obtained their Ph.D.s: a range of offerings in English, American, and world literatures, plus cultural studies and film, with a handful of TESOL and translation courses for interested students. Today in Taiwan, English professors are more able than ever before to pursue the research and teaching they trained for. Beyond personal satisfaction, progress toward literature departments that are globally competitive and justified by more than local application promises a more confident, outward looking academy in which otherness is not simply a mirror for the self. To use the Hunt analogy, once again, effective interdisciplinarity depends on the integrity of disciplines as discrete constructs, not only in principal, but in practice.
My third reason to resist comparativist trends stems from their effects on teaching, which are amplified by looming change and rising anxiety in the profession. By this, I mean the degree to which English departments in Taiwan are seeing the erosion of their traditional mandate to teach language and prepare students for careers as language teachers themselves. As I said, students now arrive at NCU with language abilities that have caused us to question the need for required language courses. This is due in large part to a policy decision some years ago to begin teaching English in Taiwan’s elementary schools, rather than junior high. Around the same time, NCU also established a language center staffed by professional language teachers to serve wider university needs in this area, further reducing the number of language courses that English professors had to teach. In addition, students who need fewer language classes are less likely to be interested in teaching as a career. This is good, it turns out, because as Taiwan’s birthrate drops and schools close, there are fewer teaching jobs. Closer economic ties with China also mean that English no longer seems the meal ticket it was for those who once pursued careers as translators and secretaries.

So, now we teach what we want, with greatly reduced responsibility for language education. However, fewer language classes removes the service component that long provided cover for literature, in much the way writing classes have justified English departments in the US, exposing us to questions about cost and value that now plague humanities abroad almost as a matter of course. In the West, these questions have become increasingly pressing. The much publicized “crisis in the humanities” has been caused by several factors, including the growth of publically-funded higher education after WWII, giving legislative bodies leverage over curricula; canon reform in the 1980s, which denied us recourse to the non-contingent value of the Great Tradition; and growing economic instability, which erodes the fiscal integrity of higher education, humanities in particular. While writing afforded English departments some protection, once again, even this has failed as universities turn to standalone programs, like language centers here, staffed by specialists. The effect has been lost tenure lines and adjunct hiring at lower pay and no benefits. It remains to be seen how the humanities cope with the most recent cry from the IT jungle, MOOCs (massive open online courses), but it is certain that questions once dismissed as merely philistine today constitute a significant threat.

With the local economy struggling and budget cuts unavoidable, the problems of university English abroad are now our problems. It behooves us, then, not to treat questions of cost and value as beneath our concern. Indeed, one upside to the humanities crisis in the West is that urgency has convinced many to put aside Arnoldian clichés and try to answer government officials, university administrators, parents, and students when they ask, not unreasonably, “Why English?”

This is not easy to do, and our impulses in satisfying public expectation have a tendency to be counterproductive. Legislators and parents have no interest in our research, of course, and not a lot more in what we teach. What they do care about, especially in hard times, is how what we teach helps students get jobs. As educators, our main difficulty is how to explain the employability of young people who now spend so much time in our classes reading novels, watching films, and engaging in other activities usually identified as leisure. Yet as Taiwan lurches toward a service economy, employability is our greatest strength—though not one, as James Miller shows, that English professors have generally wanted to admit, preferring airier validations: “sweetness and light,” advanced citizenship (Great Books), social empowerment of the masses (Cultural Studies), and radical political change (Critical Pedagogy).

Efforts to supply English with a redemptive social mission obscure the more banal needs we serve, including job training. The same is true for what I have been calling (loosely, I admit) comparativist trends, which combine redemption with an appeal to relevance in a pedagogical context where foreignness increases strain on an already growing sense that we must justify what
we teach by way of application—to the present, local, and self, as I put it before.

Yet to move application to the center of what we teach (as activism and knowledge transfer, no less than language training) risks compromising the principal advantage of English as a university major after WWII, when the task in an expanding system of mass higher education in countries like the United States was to teach, not just reading and writing, but advanced literacy for workers in a post-industrial knowledge economy. An often remarked-on anomaly of twentieth-century Anglo-American literary criticism is the continuing influence of New Criticism long after its intellectual demise in the 1930s. One reason for the extended afterlife of a methodology that emphasized the formal analysis of a fixed literary “canon” in isolation from their contexts (history, politics, and so forth) is that the texts chosen for “close reading” featured moral ambiguity, psychological complexity, and linguistic sophistication, providing thereby the basis for depth analysis in the form of a thesis-driven, interpretive essay. Skills fostered in close reading made English a base degree for advanced education in a wide range of service professions, where not only language is required, but innovation and creativity.

Of course any text should work for this purpose, not just those identified as masterpieces, in particular since theorists have provided the analytical means to “read” almost anything as a text. This is Miller’s point when he dismisses efforts to raise the profile of literary education beyond the bureaucratic. As head of writing at Rutgers, Miller has little use for literature at all, saying that with so much going in the world that has direct relevance to students’ lives, why waste time with the likes of Holden Caulfield, Captain Ahab, or Lady Macbeth. Similar views are expressed throughout the booming field of writing instruction (in those standalone writing programs now so popular with university administrators), as literature competes with a wide array of student-centered approaches, from inviting them to join the contemporary conversation on current affairs, to the proliferation of creative writing classes that are often openly therapeutic.

Betrayed once again, however, are the creative objectives of close reading, which, as anyone schooled in New Criticism knows, defers not to the reader, but to the text. When in a recent special issue of Pedagogy educators were invited to comment on what they thought was the key issue in English education today, one decided, after some reflection, that it was the same issue she struggled with throughout her career: at what point do we intervene in a student’s reading and say, No, it is not supported by the material? While we seek a creative encounter with texts, not just any reading—or other creative act—will do. Another contributor argues that staging such lessons in the context of literature that originates in other times and places provides space for students who, at 18 and caught up in the turmoil of young adulthood, have enough present, local, and self to deal with. Other people’s texts permit “play,” wherein they develop creative talent apart from the “contemporary conversation,” which threatens only to recruit them at a time in life when they are impressionable and insecure. To the interpretive limits we place on form can eventually be added history and theory—and after that, the terms of responsible citizenship and comparative relation. But this all begins with undergraduates fooling around with texts.

If we accept this view, that playing with other people’s texts facilitates creativity by freeing students from the constraints of the local, then it might be precisely with Holden Caulfield, Captain Ahab, and Lady Macbeth that they have the best chance to develop that capacity for critical thought we now most pride ourselves on imparting. As for jobs, at a time when every major economy in the region is trying to effect a turn from export-driven manufacturing to service industries and R&D, English nurtures the necessary talent not simply by teaching the pedestrian usage of what many regard as the world’s first global lingua franca, but how that usage may be tweaked in the service of imagination.
Works Cited
