

doing and who we are. This makes the process of explaining ourselves and what we do to the general public, university administrations, and students even more difficult.

In addition, the lack of an agreed-on title makes it difficult to write about the people who make up the English department. All studies that seek to examine the history of English and literature studies must tiptoe around the subject. As a result, it is difficult to speak about the practitioners of the subject directly and specifically. Awkwardly, we refer to English educators, English teachers, and professors of English.

How did we get into this situation? Are we too new a profession to have acquired a defining word? Bear in mind that *scientist* only goes back to the 1830s. In contrast, references to *composition* as the act of putting ideas into a written form go back to the 1600s. The first chair of English literature was established at the University of Edinburgh in 1762. A lack of tradition does not seem to be the problem.

It is possible that a generic term for the English or literature scholar or teacher was not developed because of a historical resistance to professionalism. Certainly, a run through the words grouped around the dictionary entries for *composition*, *bibliography*, *grammar*, *literature*, and *English* presents few options for a name, except perhaps *philologist*.

The more I look at it, the more promising this word becomes. While *philology* was eventually rerouted to the more narrow study of comparative linguistics, it once included the study of culture, a usage closer to the modern emphasis of the profession. The *OED* gives the now rare general sense of *philology* as “the study of literature, in a wide sense, including grammar, literary criticism and interpretation, the relation of literature and written records to history, etc.” According to Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), the narrowing of this word’s meaning was possibly due to the “positivist temper of early professionalism, which worked against broad cultural generalization” (74). The older, more general usage still remains, however, in the titles of some scholarly journals.

While I find myself invoking the older, broader definition of philology, my purpose is not to define what or how we study but rather to give an identity to the scholars who pursue such questions, to suggest a professional title, and, I hope, to offer at least a start toward self-respect. *Philologist* does have some negative connotations, since it is closely identified with the language-literature split recognized by Albert S. Cook in his 1897 Presidential Address (Graff 80); however, perhaps enough time has passed that the word might be viewed as neutral. If I am wrong and my proposal strikes others as too modest in

the Swiftian sense of the word, I leave it to them to suggest an alternative that will include members of the entire English department.

Of course, what I am discussing here is merely the lack of a word, but if we agree on anything in English, it is that language is important. And scholars who are not sure of the validity of their professional identity will suffer the vagaries of the job market the most.

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To the Editor:

In response to Hannah Berliner Fischthal’s request for a title for “literature persons,” let me offer the following with a wry smile. Given the staggering advances in computer technology, interactive television, and other pictorial communications media and given the nearly wholehearted embrace of these technologies in education in this point-and-click world, where language becomes a nuisance, the so-called experts in literature, those who maintain a quaint interest in the archaic skills of reading and writing, could simply be known as they once were: the literates.

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To the Editor:

Hannah Berliner Fischthal launches a search for an appellation for “literature persons.”

Sifting the models she offers, we could generate the following:

literet (like *poet*)  
literatist (like *linguist*, *dramatist*)  
literatician (like *rhetorician*)  
literatographer (like *historiographer*)

None of these strikes my ear euphoniously. The problem lies in the sound of *-iterat-*. It’s a phonetic element that doesn’t combine well with any element except *-ure*. I say scrap it and start over.

Curiously, Fischthal omits a plausible model: *philosopher*. This suggests *philologist*, an honorable appellation tightly bound to the early years of the profession but perhaps associated, fairly or unfairly, with “old-fashioned” methods of scholarship. So I nominate a cognate: *philologer*. It has the advantage of sounding fresh while in fact being well-established. *The Random House Dictionary* defines the etymon of both *philologist* and

*philologist* as “literary, studious, argumentative.” Boy, does that fit our profession!

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### Action and Idiosyncrasy in the Lyric

To the Editor:

In “Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics” (110 [1995]: 196–205), Mark Jeffreys argues the futility of trying to assign lyric to a specific ideology: “a given lyric text . . . is *not* inevitably representative of a specific ideology simply because it has been identified as a lyric” (196). Concomitantly, he argues that critical questions concerning the supposed ideology of the lyric serve the ideological positions of postmodern “critical schools”: hastening to displace the New Critics and their vocabularies, postmodern theorists have reduced the lyric to “a metonymy for New Critical ideology and, in the extreme case, for all of Western literary authority since Plato” (203). The lyric has been marginalized as a subject of contemporary critical discourse because of the prejudice against the supposedly united New Critical argument for presence and ahistoricity. Jeffreys points out, however, that “the New Critical era’s views of lyric were far less simplistic and unified than recent caricatures of New Criticism have suggested” (196) and that critical arguments about lyric are really arguments for authority—attempts to rule lyric (203).

Jeffreys’s argument is extremely important, I believe, because it implicitly questions how we as academics perceive, study, teach, and write about lyric and other “literary” subject matter. Those in university English departments who, enamored of theory, neglect the primary literary text in favor of a theoretical one fail to realize that the primary text—be it a collection of poems, a novel, a play, et cetera—is also theoretical in that it theorizes an approach to a real-life problem or situation. All literary texts are theoretical in this sense.

Jeffreys finds deconstructive theory regarding the lyric simplistic and historically uninformed (197). I believe that rigorously knowledgeable questions about antiquity reveal inadequacies in the deconstructive project: although Derrida has routinely deconstructed Plato and Aristotle and although it seems natural for deconstructive critics to equate “voice” with “presence” after reading Derrida and to criticize classical concepts of lyric from that perspective, a serious problem arises when we consider that Plato and Aristotle never read Derrida.

Their preoccupations were their own, and deconstructive criticism has not yet understood the relation between what Plato and Aristotle wrote and how they lived and acted in Greek society.

The Greeks prized “voice,” or speech, because it was the closest thing to action. Writing, which was farther from action, was prized less. Although the Greeks valued theory, they valued action more, because action manifested the social self to the polis. It was through action that the Greeks discovered themselves as human or social beings. Theory offered little in this regard. For instance, while Plato wrote the dialogues, it was more important that Socrates lived them. André Gide provides a perfect example of the classical concern for the discrepancy between theory and action when in *L’immoraliste* Michel says, “How well I understood then that almost every ethical teaching of the great philosophers of antiquity was a teaching by example as much as—even more than—by words!” ([New York: Vintage-Random, 1970] 100–01). The same holds true today. Our bodies decide things first.

Jeffreys finds Marxist theory more conducive to theorizing the lyric. Theodor Adorno, for example, focuses on the social role of lyric, especially the utopian impulse for change. Marxist theories “represent a more affirmative, perhaps even radical, vision of the ideological possibilities of such poetry” (Jeffreys 199–200).

Jeffreys has some reservations about viewing lyric solely as resistance literature (200), and so have I. The utopian impulse is as old as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*—wherein the king’s subjects pray to the gods for relief from the tyrant and get it—and is only one motive for the lyric. Marxist circumscription adds little to our understanding of the genre.

Instead of looking at lyric as creating “the dream of a world in which things would be different” (199), I believe it would be more profitable to look at lyric as creating the dream of a world in which *the person* would be different. Within a framework in which human beings are the measure of value, we can understand lyric as a social, private, and idiosyncratic phenomenon more than an ideological one.

The same can be said for postmodernist theory and the New Criticism. Take, for example, Cleanth Brooks and Paul de Man. Both follow in the tradition of “close reading.” Both wrote brilliant essays on the rhetoric of criticism that are tours de force of critical reading, critical practice. What marks and at the same time separates their work, I would argue, is not so much critical ideology as social motive, private motive, and idiosyncrasy. Similarly, as Jeffreys points out, C. Day Lewis and Elder Olson thought about lyric idiosyncratically and, as a result, picked different lyrics to fill out their collections (200–02).