



Wagner, V. (2004). Review of *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literacy Studies*. *Workplace*, 11, 190-193.

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REVIEW OF *THE EMPLOYMENT OF ENGLISH: THEORY, JOBS, AND THE FUTURE OF LITERARY STUDIES*

by Michael Bérubé  
New York UP, 1998

"I love literature. I really do." Thus opens cultural critic and Penn State University English professor Michael Bérubé's *The Employment of English*, a collection of loosely interrelated essays about English, literary studies, cultural studies, and the role all of these play in the larger cultural sphere. And while these opening words are partly facetious, aimed as they are at those who have criticized Bérubé and other cultural studies advocates for renouncing literature and aesthetics in favor of politics, they are also meant seriously. Bérubé *does* love literature, as well as literary and cultural analysis, and his book is an effort to describe, engage, and defend the work done within English departments by examining how literary and cultural studies are employed, both within and outside of academia. All of the essays work toward answering two questions that he puts forth in his preface: "What does the future look like for departments of English literature?" and "Does academic literary study even *have* a future—or should it?" (viii).

2. The heart of the book—or at least what I consider to be the best, truest heart of the book—is Bérubé's concern for English majors and English graduate students themselves. What, in fact, does studying English prepare them to do? Should they go to grad school and spend ten years slaving away writing a dissertation and teaching innumerable, underpaid sections of composition, only to have the faintest hope of obtaining that gold standard—a tenure-track job? Or should they, perhaps, aim no higher than a B.A. or M.A. in English, which can still prepare them for any number of jobs—as secondary school teachers, journalists, public relations specialists, lawyers, etc.? What does the "employment" of English in the future look like? And, to use the pun that he himself deploys in the opening pages of the book, How best can English be employed?

3. Bérubé's answers to these questions are various, but in short, he wants to defend both the practice of traditional, aesthetic literary studies and that of a more politically informed, text-based cultural studies. At the same time, his book urges us to reconsider and reform the unfair employment practices inherent in the structure of English graduate studies and many English departments across the country.

4. In the first chapter, "Cultural Studies and Cultural Capital," Bérubé takes up cultural studies, defending it in part because it prepares those who study it to critically interpret all manner of texts—literary and otherwise—in their world. As he says, while the study of English may not necessarily be valued by the culture for the more arcane historical and literary knowledge it imparts, it remains a valuable course of study for people who will enter the contemporary labor market. As Bérubé points out, "degrees in English

may still be convertible into gainful employment—not because they mark their recipients as literate, well-rounded young men and women who can allude to Shakespeare in business memos, but because they mark their recipients as people who can potentially negotiate a wide range of intellectual tasks and handle (in various ways) disparate kinds of ‘textual’ materials, from memos, legal briefs, and white papers to ad campaigns, databases, and electronic newsmagazines" (23).

5. This, indeed, is one of Bérubé's strongest defenses of cultural studies, even if it seems, on the surface—and to use a phrase he unpacks later in the book—to be selling out. What is so wrong, he implies in this chapter and argues more openly in the last, entitled "Cultural Criticism and the Politics of Selling Out," with selling out? Particularly when (and here's the book's other best pun) "selling out" can mean not only becoming basely consumerist, but also reaching the largest possible audience with one's analytical and theoretical capabilities?

6. The second chapter, "The Blessed of the Earth," looks at why, from practical, financial, and labor relations standpoints, anyone involved with the production and dissemination of literary and cultural studies—including English majors, graduate students, and professors—might do well to turn their critical, text-interpreting eye on their own profession. This chapter examines and analyzes the teaching assistant unionization movement, from Bérubé's vantage point as a cultural critic, writer, speaker-at-large, and union sympathizer. He looks at the efforts by Yale teaching assistants, via the Graduate Employees and Students Organization (GESO), to unionize, critically analyzing the sometimes cool—and sometimes outright hostile—faculty response to this union movement.

7. Bérubé proposes a theory for this response: namely, that graduate employee unionization threatens the class status of Yale professors by exposing the financial and corporate underpinnings of their *own* position within the institution of Yale. Bérubé is surprised (and rightly so, I think) that even those faculty members who are, ostensibly, politically-informed cultural critics have had difficulty in seeing the need for graduate employee unions. He argues that they, like many of the higher-up, faculty-level practitioners of "English," have been under the illusion that their field is removed from the corporate world of money and power. Thus, dirtying their hands with things like union movements would dirty their dearly held notions of the pristine field of literary studies itself. Worse yet, organizing drives bring the specifically Yale-ish culture of ivory tower literary studies down to the level of state universities across the country, where graduate employee union drives more commonly secure collective bargaining rights. In other words, a Yale faculty that once thought itself to be the best of the best—meaning, in fact, the most removed of the removed—has found itself having to confront its own cultural capital and the implications of the fact that it no longer single-handedly owns the world of literature, theory, and culture.

8. In addition to its close reading of the Yale situation, this chapter offers a down-to-earth analysis of the exploitative practices among graduate departments that farm out sections of composition to legions of graduate students only to boot such workers out with little hope of getting a tenure-track job in the field. Just as importantly, it also offers a case study of how one might use cultural studies to analyze one's own position in an institution. In this way, it continues the argument of the first chapter, while deepening and making personal the need for such critical cultural analysis.

9. The next several chapters offer more analyses of English departments and their employees, making further arguments for improving the working conditions and employment outlook of those involved in literary and cultural studies. One of Bérubé's eminently practical suggestions to this end is to limit the numbers of students accepted into graduate study in English. This suggestion is aimed at improving the working conditions of those employed in the field, by limiting the numbers of graduates, and, thus, future job applicants. Who could argue with this suggestion? Even those who might be squeamish about the unionization of graduate employees—and even those who consider themselves fiscally conservative—would seem to be hard-pressed to find an argument against this proposal. That it has received (from its earlier incarnation in Bérubé and Cary Nelson's *Higher Education Under Fire*) such embittered responses

from critics both on the left and the right—some of which responses Bérubé enumerates in these chapters—only shows how removed from the world of *work* many involved in the study of English like to think themselves.

10. The second half of Bérubé's book is less focused and forceful than the first, though it does have its moments, as well. The chapters in this section take up such issues as advocacy within the classroom, free speech, and the unreconstructed conservatism of one-time best-selling cultural critic Dinesh D'Souza. These chapters are valuable for their individual analyses of politics and education, and further proof of Bérubé's argument for a literate and politically aware cultural studies. The best chapter in this section is the last—"Cultural Criticism and the Politics of Selling Out"—which takes apart the aforementioned pun of "selling out," making the case for selling out to cultural studies in the positive sense of the term (as in selling out a concert), if only because it opens up wider audiences for the work that cultural critics do. Bérubé himself, with works like his *Life As We Know It* and numerous magazine pieces, has shown that there is no contradiction between being a smart, literate academic and a public figure concerned with broad cultural and ethical issues. In fact, his work demonstrates over and over again that those two identities can inform each other in surprising and productive ways.

11. Taken as a whole, *The Employment of English* is a valuable contribution to the conversation about cultural studies and the work of English—a conversation Bérubé himself helped to start and in which he remains a key conversant. Perhaps the best thing about this book for me, however, is that it provides an occasion to analyze my own history with English departments, literary studies, cultural studies, and theory—and I suspect the same might be true for anyone who has had their hands in any or all of these fields. Indeed, my deep interest in this book derives almost entirely from my own personal history within and outside of academia.

12. To wit: I received my Ph.D. in English—specializing in critical theory and American literature—from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 1996 (where, incidentally, I got to know Bérubé, having taken a class on Institutional Criticism from him). Looking down the barrel of potentially years of fruitless academic job searching, and seeking work that would let me stay home with my two children while they were young, I made the decision to leave academics altogether—at least for the time being—and to try my hand at freelance writing. As it happened, this decision paid off. Though lately I haven't been analyzing the frontier metaphor in true-crime novels or the intricacies of Theodore Roosevelt's views toward hunting in his writings on the West, I have been writing about (and, amazingly, getting *paid* to write about), everything from dairies, football factories, and the Coonskin Library (for *American Profile* magazine) to banking software (for *Bank Systems and Technology*) to ginseng (for *Herb Quarterly*). In other words, I'm a real-life example of someone who left academics and the study of literature and lived to tell the tale.

13. I must admit, however, that I have also felt the siren call of the ivory tower—or, at least, a small liberal arts college in rural Ohio. I have recently started work as a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Muskingum College, in New Concord, Ohio, where I teach journalism classes and advise the student newspaper. I'm back in academics, but I'm not the same person I was when I was writing admittedly arcane, theoretical accounts of modern and contemporary American literature. Since leaving English and venturing out into the "real world" for seven years, I've found myself to have become, at least in part, a journalist—and I'm happy now to be able to employ that identity in the classroom.

14. I would be remiss, though, if I denied the role that literary and cultural studies have had in the production of that identity, and, indeed, in qualifying me for this job. It turns out that both doing cultural studies *and* getting a Ph.D. has, ultimately, been useful to me—something which has taken me a while to understand, and which, honestly, Bérubé's book has helped me to clarify for myself. My work in cultural criticism allows me to negotiate the world of bank trade publications and general interest magazines with relative ease, and yet I am gratified to find that the diploma from the University of Illinois that I have

(finally) framed and hung on my new office wall continues to have a meaning—and both a cultural and monetary value—within academia.

15. I describe this process I have gone through not at all to deny Bérubé's arguments for critically analyzing English graduate departments and halting the overproduction of Ph.D.s—since I, too, think that it is negligent, cruel, and just plain wrong for English departments to keep pumping out graduates into an uncertain job market only because these departments need the cheap labor in composition classrooms. Rather, my experiences affirm the argument that lies at the center of Bérubé's book: literary and cultural studies matter, and they matter in all sorts of wildly unpredictable ways, some of which concern employment, and some of which have to do with just making us better equipped to deal with the vicissitudes—oh, okay, the slings and arrows (see? I'm still an English major)—of life in twenty-first century America.