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The Former Heartlands of English Studies

This and the next chapter give an overview of histories of English Studies as an academic discipline in various contexts, which have, as observed earlier, repeatedly traced departures from philology. These are primarily institutional histories. That is, they are structured according to careers of the discipline in institutional contexts – particularly in university schools and departments of English Studies (with several variants, simply English with literature centered, or English language and literature together or separately, or English with other aligned subjects), but also in professional associations and scholarly production, typically demarcated by politically defined territories (states). Debates and rationales for establishing institutional spaces, in determining curricula and scholarly practices, in identifying professional affiliations and setting up professional bodies, in responding to educational policy, and so on generally provide the grids for historical accounting here. Together these delineate negotiations and renegotiations and sometimes transformations of the habitual life of English Studies after being established with some institutional markers. The kinds of departures from philology traced in these differ from context to context, and indeed between different historical accounts within specific contexts: sometimes these start with a historical philological drive and at others they lead up to retrospection or rediscovery of a philological horizon. The understandings of philology show considerable variety, as might be expected for a term with such multifaceted connotations. They often take philology in the narrow sense as concerned with a pre-Saussurean view of language or comparative philology along a predominantly German model; and frequently present superficial attitudes to philology, for instance, as a fussy and dull preoccupation with textual and grammatical minutiae. But in many instances these also apprehend philology in a broad sense,
along some of the lines of the four nodes of convergence outlined in Chapter 1, and with several ideological stances: with nostalgia for philology’s grand ambition, as scholarship delving into particularities of and the universality of culture; with disapprobation of philological tracking of origins and genesis, aspiration to unity, and the consequent proclivity for conservative or undesirable ideological positions. Through narrow to broad, misconceived to partially conceived, conceptions of philology and the departure of English Studies therefrom, these two chapters describe a drift away from philology in a general way – and in a general way the horizon and persistent features of philological scholarship are thereby reasonably grasped. What seems to be evidence of ignorance in one historical account nevertheless informs the rationale of general drift in such histories viewed in a linked-up fashion.

The point of this part – these chapters – is linkage: the juxtaposition of histories of English Studies within specific territorial contexts and, importantly, across such contexts. The network of connections and the varied rationales of departure from and apprehension of philology within and across state territories suggest the contours of the increasingly diverse and global scope of English Studies, without wholly dissolving disciplinary coherence. To that end four political territories are focused upon here: in this chapter, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA), dubbed “the former heartlands of English Studies”; in the next, continental Europe (on being conceived as the transnational formation of the European Union) and India, dubbed “the former hinterlands of English Studies.” Admittedly, this limited focus on four political territories gives only a very limited purchase on the current global spread of English Studies; and yet, there are perhaps enough pluralities and overlapping influences within and across these to convey some sense of that global spread, however imperfectly.

To many it would probably seem that the UK and USA have not ceased to be the heartlands of English Studies, and that to think of them as only “formerly” so is questionable. In some ways, of course, that is unarguable: it is doubtful whether other countries make as large a material investment in the scholarship and pedagogy of English Studies, or are as sumptuously resourced for that purpose. The influence that is exerted from these contexts on the global pursuit of the discipline is still very considerable. And yet, with the global scope of English Studies in mind, it is uncertain whether these contexts have much of an advantage over various others in intellectually invigorating the discipline, in generating what seems dynamic therein. But the UK and USA certainly were heartlands in that sense in the history of English Studies, and the