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Against credits

The title I have announced refers to modularity, a notion of curriculum design that, usually from American sources, has been adopted in some European countries, is being debated in others, and which has not been raised at all in some. The advantages of modularity (where it works), are patent. Students become freer in organizing their studies, both in terms of the time in which they want to finish, and where they want to pursue them. The disadvantages are also clear: Modularity, in the shape of the accumulation of credits, seems to make knowledge countable and exchangeable; it turns knowledge into a commodity--not exactly what many of us teaching in the humanities have thought it should be.

Since attending the British Council Symposium on "Teaching English in a Changing World" near Milan some weeks ago--an important event for English studies in Europe--one particular aspect of modularity has been on my mind. Is it possible to create a European curriculum, which, in the framework of international programmes of student exchanges (like Erasmus, and soon Socrates), which would be extremely helpful. I should like to concentrate this question today.

In doing so I am deliberately going to bracket some issues and problems. But as you will see, some of them will return in the end. They concern the relationship between literary and cultural studies, the role of English in relation to American and New literatures (on which people on the Continent often have more relaxed views than the English). I am also aware that English can be taught in a wide range of ways (*civilization* in France, for example), but for the moment I am taking for granted an approach considered somewhat old-fashioned by some which focuses on the canonical works of literature and literary

history, the kind of English that is still influential in many places, and from which all the attempts to move and have started from.

There is an imbalance between teaching English in England and teaching English on the Continent (my use of the English term for the non-English Euro-pean countries itself illustrates the complexities of the situation; Scotland is also in some respects Continental (cf. Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature*, 1992). It is an imbalance that becomes clearly visible at symposia like the ones organized by the British Council in Salamanca and in Milan (and hopefully in Switzerland next time), where speakers from England address a Continental audience.

Teaching English in England means that, along with people in history and sociology, you find yourself at the centre of a cultural debate, on the site, where cultural meanings are formulated, enforced and changed. Issues of canon formation, also of what literacy itself is supposed to mean have to be addressed continually; the debate on the National Curriculum is a good illustration of this. English faculty, whether they like it or not (and some definitely do) are drawn into an ideological and political debate that is crucial to the culture.

Teaching English on the Continent is in many respects different, even if we discount the phenomenon of English as a second language, which, in various ways, continually affects what we do. Ideological and political issues will be fought over in History and Sociology, and, like in England, in the departments where the traditional national literatures are taught (in the German-speaking world this is, of course, the German departments)--there are, as yet, no departments of European literature. English departments, on the other hand, tend to be rather more quiet places. Sometimes they try to keep up British traditions of pragmatism and enlightened compromise, possibly in a hostile environment. English departments tend to be more quiet places, in particular, because they find themselves on the margins of public debate. This need not be a bad

place to intervene from, however; there is an admirable tradition of this kind in Italy, for example, but people tend to intervene as intellectuals rather than professors of English. The sense of being marginal is reinforced in universities where students study more than one subject (in my university it is normally three); these issues will often spill over from the fields that are dominant in the cultural debate.

Having emphasized differences, let me just mention one area where teaching English in England and on the Continent may share concerns. Over the past twenty-five years or so there has been a marked shift from the study of so-called "mainstream" literature to that of women, of minorities (Black American and British, Native American, etc.), of the third world, and of marginalized groups (the gay, lesbian communities, etc.). This is certainly due to the wish to question traditional notions of homogeneous culture, and also a sense of social justice. But it may also be the result of the feeling that we ourselves as professionals, along with the literary culture we stand for, have been marginalized in a media-dominated culture, a feeling that makes us sympathize with these communities. The remarkable ease with which Continental academics have taken up literatures in English, may be partly due to their sense of having existed on the margins for a long time.

The difference of perspective between teaching English in England and teaching English on the Continent is crucial. In England English literature may be taught without much reference to other literatures, languages, and cultures. On the Continent English is always an Other that we have to confront (the Other in England tends to be defined socially or sexually).

But the two perspectives, which I have labelled English and Continental, cannot simply be put beside each other, as I have done so far. I have to introduce one more complication. The Continental perspective will always include the English perspective as well (note my use of the word "Continental"), if only because much of the secondary material is written from an English perspective.

There are at least two ways of dealing with this problem. One, which is quite common, is to claim that the problem does not exist really, because we all contribute to the same kind of knowledge, those on the Continent may just do so under more difficult circumstances. Those who think like this run the risk of being left behind, of being provincial.

The other possibility is that we (and I am slipping into the "we" deliberately) accept our specific Continental situation and turn what may have looked like a dis-advantage into a point of strength. As Agostino Lombardo emphasized at the Symposium I have mentioned, we should speak from the vantage point of our own European cultures, because this is our best chance of contributing something significant. Many important studies in our field have grown out of this inter-cultural situation.

Being aware of difference we will also take a strong interest in how English critics deal with the same texts that we study. This will be an ethnographers' interest, as it were. Recent debates on Englishness have offered particularly rich material on this. This is where English studies, even defined in a narrow sense, will turn into cultural studies, into the study of the culture of English studies.

How can we make use of these opportunities in our teaching? How can we make visible the borders that are to be negotiated with profit? First of all, our students will usually carry these borders inside themselves, especially if they also study other languages. In my experience, however, the compartmentalization of students' minds in this respect is quite effective; they do not, for example, feel the need to mediate between different uses of concepts. There seems to be something to postmodern notions of the self.

We therefore have to draw attention to the borders. But how? Obviously we cannot burden our crowded curricula with additional courses. Rather we should introduce elements in our courses that highlight intercultural issues (and many among us do so already, of course). I see three possibilities in particular:

The first is the most obvious. Wherever there is an opportunity for inter-cultural reference in our courses we should seize it. Notions of Romanticism in different countries, for example, lend themselves for this purpose.

The second, which I have found quite successful, is the use of translation, not in the sense of translation *studies* (even though this may also prove useful), but literary translation from English into the students' mother tongue. Here I am not interested in the considerable heuristic advantages of translation practice (translation as understanding, translation as requiring choice). Rather, the practice of literary translation juxtaposes two cultures; it asks about the relative position of a text in the source and target cultures. It asks about how the poetics in which the source is based may be transposed into the target culture. It asks about the audiences in the source and target cultures. And it then requires students to articulate their conclusions in a text of their own making.

The third possibility concerns methodology (I have not yet had a chance to explore this myself). We should try out an approach common in English studies (e.g., cultural materialism) on a text in the students' mother tongue. This will bring out almost immediately different notions of history, of the function of literature, and of its relationship to other arts.

I have emphasized differences here, because, seeking commonality, we rarely articulate them in academic discourse. There are also shared traditions, of course (the Classics, for example); there are convergences (reader-response criticism and/versus reception aesthetics and their appropriation in various countries (cf. Robert Holub, *Crossing the Borders*, 1992) may be a case in point). And I should argue that the kind of juxtaposition I have suggested, in the very act of making visible differences, also highlights what we have in common, and how differences may be made fruitful to both. As such they also contribute to further convergence.

Let me return to where I started from: Can we create a European curriculum in English studies, one

that is based on modules that can simply be added up? I should almost say: I hope not, not for some time. One of the great opportunities of Europe, as I see it, is learning how to negotiate difference. Cultures have different traditions of dealing with this problem; those with imperial and rationalist, i. e. universalist, traditions may have particular difficulties with difference. And the rather fundamental imbalance I have mentioned will only disappear once the links between nation, language and culture have been weakened.

Individual cases will continue to be judged on their merits (even where credits have been introduced, we know that not all of them are considered equal). This is a good thing. It forces us to consider alternatives. It teaches us to be flexible without being lenient. It opens our minds. What we need is mutual credit, not credits.