

A dip into history

Basel English department, cellar theatre. November 14, 2019

Balz Engler

In 1969 the English department of Basel University moved from rather cramped rooms near the cathedral to much more spacious premises near the main building of the university on Nadelberg, premises that included a cellar theatre. On November 14, 2019, the Golden Jubilee of this move and the first production (Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*) were celebrated in style, with an address by the vice-rector, Thomas Grob, a tour d'horizon by the head of department, Ina Habermann, and a brilliant production of three scenes by the student company, *The Gay Beggars*, whose tradition goes back to 1941, followed by a reception bringing together staff, student actors and alumni/ae. I contributed the following brief presentation on the history of the building, of English as a discipline, and of the department.

Please note: This is not any kind of definitive history. Dates are often difficult to pin down (creation of a chair, appointment to a professorship, date of first semester teaching, etc., may not coincide, for example)

▲ : This sign refers to an accompanying Powerpoint slide.

The first time I stood in front of an audience in this room was fifty years ago, playing a bit part in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, the first production of the *Gay Beggars* in the new theatre of the English department. I was a servant who, at a climactic moment in the fifth act, helped to carry a coffin on stage. Fifty years: I might as well be an exhibit in the little exhibition Daniela Keller has prepared, as a kind of fossil. I may be the right person to offer you a dip into history.

I might as well begin very early-on.

The Building

▲ We are in one of the oldest buildings in the city, the Schönes Haus,¹ going back to the 13th century, one that survived the earthquake of 1356 without

¹ https://altbasel.ch/haushof/schoenes_haus.html (in German).

being seriously damaged. Architectural historians come to study its roof timbering, one of the oldest wooden structures in the country.

We are in the cellar of an even older building. You may wonder about the openings in the wall in front of you: We are probably looking from inside the building out towards a medieval street that once ran past it at the level of the upper cellar, even before the Schönes Haus was built.

You may also wonder about the strange structure in the corner. This brings us closer to the present. It seems to be what is left of a 19th century steam heating system, which, on the insistence of Rudolf Stamm was not removed when this space was turned into a theatre in the 1960s.

A marginal subject

▲ Perhaps it is useful to remind ourselves that up to the 19th century the faculty of philosophy was not considered equal to those of theology, medicine and law, where parsons, doctors and lawyers were trained. At the beginning of their studies, however, they had to acquire some general basic knowledge in introductory courses. New disciplines which did not fit into the three traditional faculties were also routinely swept into the faculty of philosophy.²

The study of modern languages and literatures, usually in a national and historical perspective, gained in importance—also because advanced schools needed teachers.

In 1885 the “Germanisch-romanisches Seminar” was founded at Basel University, located in a room on Münsterplatz. Occasional lectures on classical English authors were offered by Gustav Soldan, the professor of comparative Romance philology.

For long English remained a marginal field. In 1895 Gustav Binz got the *venia docendi* in English philology, as yet a non-existing subject. In 1896 English and Nordic sections added to the

² Typically, the Basel faculty also gradually fell apart again: 1937 split between philosophisch-historische and philosophisch naturwissenschaftliche Fakultät, creation of a wirtschaftswissenschaftliche Fakultät and a Fakultät für Psychologie.

Germanisch-romanisches Seminar. In 1900 Binz promoted to a professorship. In 1912 the first chair was created but Hans Hecht who held it joined the German army in 1914 and did not return until 1919. Not much later, in 1922, the chair remained empty until 1926 when Gustav Hübener took over, who moved on again to Bonn in 1930.

A field firmly established

▲ This changed after 1930. In 1930 Henry Lüdeke, a German-American scholar, took over and held the chair until 1960. He established American literature as a field of study at the university and is particularly remembered for his *Geschichte der amerikanischen Literatur* (1952). In 1937 the department moved to Augustinergasse to premises of its own (four rooms of its own). In 1941/42 his first theatre production, Gay's *Beggar's Opera* was staged. In 1952 the Cooper Stipendienfonds was established with funds given by a wealthy American, Clare Benedict, who also bequeathed her library (including the furniture to the department³).

In 1960 Rudolf Stamm took over the chair. He had a strong interest in the theatrical dimension of plays,⁴ reading them as scores for performance, hence the establishment of this cellar theatre. He served until 1980. In 1965 he was joined in historical linguistics (until 1990) who published an *Atlas of English Sounds* in 1979.

▲ The seminar

At this point I have to say something on the institution of the seminar and its special role in the case of English. Henry Lüdeke worked on developing the spirit of the seminar, consisting in a sense of social life, of belonging, of engaging with the subject. Students became members of the seminar (and paid an annual contribution). Only English was allowed on the premises, and there was a range of activities: students singing together (only later I became aware why my English teacher

³ <https://english.philhist.unibas.ch/en/about-us/history/>

⁴ In 1951 he published *Geschichte des englischen Theaters*.

at school could teach us so many songs).⁵ During WW2 he organized summer camps that brought together native English speakers and Swiss students. And, of course, the students produced plays, the first of them being Gay's *Beggar's Opera* in 1941. The spirit of the English department was described by somebody who experienced it as that of the "seminar family"—and it could still be felt long after.

▲ 1969 and all that

The spirit of 1968 at European universities was of a different kind, of rebellion. Ripples of it reached conservative Basel only one later, and the English department was only marginally affected. A students' union ('Fachgruppe') was founded—its first public activities being an exhibition of theatre posters in the Kollegiengebäude (1967), and an evening for first semester students (1968). Things remained civilized, also because of the enlightened attitudes of those involved. The head of department, Professor Rudolf Stamm, for example, abolished the use of all titles because he wanted to be perceived as a person, not as the representative of a hierarchical group.

But the main event for the English department in 1969 was, of course, the move to Nadelberg that we are celebrating today, the grand new premises it has occupied ever since.⁶ The library was moved with the active help of students, who re-shelved the books. It was then that the students performed *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, in a production that they then took to Prague and Krakow

Forgive me if I do not continue in a chronological fashion. In the 1980s the number of professorships was doubled. Instead of listing the names of living people (including mine): Hartwig Isernhagen, David Allerton, Willy Elmer. Things are getting complicated. Instead, I should like to juxtapose the

⁵⁵ In 1989 Allen Turner (Lektor) revived the seminar choir, and it still exists in 2019)

⁶ It may be viewed as part of a general tendency: the move of the university from Münsterhügel to Petersplatz. The new Kollegiengebäude opened in 1939.

situations then and now. Approaches have changed, institutions were founded or changed their names, etc.

Instead, I am going to juxtapose the situations in 1969 and 2019, in terms of space, number of staff, number of students, and the course of studies.

▲ Space

1969: The department at Augustinergasse had consisted of a single room for seminar meetings, one for the professors and the assistant, and two reserved for the library. Plus a roof terrace from which one could observe the barges hurtling down the Rhine, trying to hit the gap under the arches of Mittlere Brücke..

The new premises on Nadelberg were much larger, 8 rooms (including the theatre)

2019: 16 rooms

▲ Staff

1969: 2 professorships, one assistant, one student assistant. One language teacher, one phonetician. 6 in all. Offering 18 weekly meetings

2019: The department website lists 20 academic staff in various degrees of employment (among them 4 professors, 5 assistants, 3 student assistants, 3 project staff, a librarian, 2 secretaries, 29 in all. Offering 46 weekly meetings

▲ Somewhere I have to show a simplified diagram of how the field of English was gradually divided into more specialized areas. This would deserve a history of its own.

▲ There are few pictures of the staff but here there is one from 2002. Spot the people who are still around. In 2002 there were 25 people. As you will see, the number of staff has not grown as much as that of students.

▲ Students

1939: 49

1968: 130

Already then there were too many students to keep up the kind of intimate contact on which the seminar system depended. Already then the system at breaking point.

2019 Autumn Term: 405 according to latest statistics.

▲ Course of studies

1969: The university offered one degree: the doctorate, plus teacher's degrees, which were administrated by the university)

Before and after each course instructors had to sign a "Testat" confirming that the course had been properly attended, all too often to people they had never seen.

Students studied 3 subjects, in each they had to write 2 acceptable papers. In English there were 2 exams in all, one in phonetics after the second term, the other the doctoral exam. The doctoral exam was a full exam in all the subjects.

It was clear that things could not continue in a culture based on instructors and students knowing each other quite well.

2019: The studies are much more structured, which restrains freedom but also demands less self-discipline. 2 subjects. A "Leistungsüberprüfung" after each course. Collecting credit points. Three consecutive degrees: Bachelor, Master, Doctorate.

The doctoral exam consisting in a defence of the thesis.

Conclusion

The history of English at this university looks like a success. The subject has been booming, also helped, of course, by global developments. Yet student numbers in the humanities are no longer growing, and there are people asking themselves what can be done against their decline.

In the Feuilletons professors (strikingly they usually come from literary studies)—coffin carriers of a special kind—predict the death (even the suicide) of the "Geisteswissenschaften" They

advise the Geisteswissenschaften to withdraw into the beautiful shell of esthetics. I am convinced that they are wrong. More than ever We need active critical minds in the social arena.

One last point: Officially, the 'Englisches Seminar' no longer exists today. It has become a section, a Fachbereich (Anglophone Linguistics and Literary Studies) of the 'Departement Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft'. In 1885 a 'Germanisch-romanisches Seminar' was founded. In a sense, one might say that a circle has closed. We are back in the same place but also have arrived in a very different world.

Resources

<https://english.philhist.unibas.ch/en/about-us/history/>

(The history of the buildings (from 1294), The history of English at Basel University (from 1885), The Cooper Library (a library of often rare books gifted by Clare Benedict)

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clare_Benedict

Wahlen, Iris (2000): English Studies at Basel University: A Historical Survey. Lizentiatsarbeit. Universität, Basel.

The Gay Beggars

<https://www.gaybeggars.ch/past-productions> (from 1941)

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