

■ Studying English, studying difference

by Balz Engler

There is an imbalance between teaching English in England and teaching English on the Continent. It is an imbalance that becomes clearly visible at symposia like the ones on 'Teaching English in a Changing World' organized by the British Council in Salamanca and in Milan (important events for English Studies in Europe), where speakers from England address a Continental audience. The world is not only changing; it is also diverse.

Those teaching English in England find themselves, along with their colleagues in history and sociology, at the centre of a cultural debate, where cultural meanings are formulated, enforced, resisted and displaced. 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.

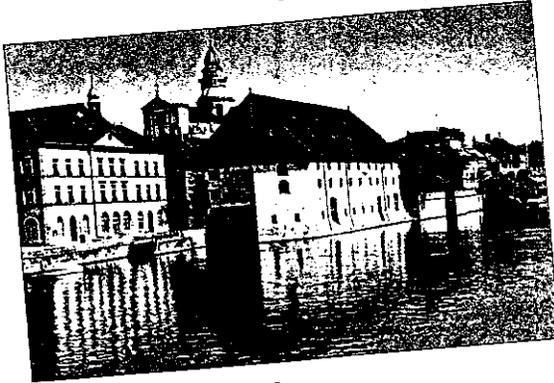
Teaching English on the Continent is in many respects different, even if we discount the challenge of English as a second language, which, in various ways affects the way English literature is taught. Ideological and political issues will be fought over in history and sociology, and as happens in England, in the departments where the traditional national literatures are taught. English departments on the other hand, tend to be more quiet places. Sometimes they try to keep up British traditions of pragmatism and enlightened compromise, possibly in a hostile environment. They are usually more quiet places 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 (like mine) where students have to take more than one subject; there issues will often spill over into English from the fields where the debates take place.

This 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 as such is the Other that has to be confronted: in England the Other 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. There is one more complication. The Continental perspective will always include the English perspective as well, if only because much of the secondary material used in the study of English literature is written from an English perspective.

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

The Landhaus at Solothurn in



Switzerland is likely to be the venue for the next in the series of British Council Symposia on changing trends in English Studies. The Symposium, scheduled for the second week of September 1996, will be organized jointly with the

English department of the University of Basel and should be co-chaired by Balz Engler and Terence Hawkes. Previous meetings were held in Salamanca and Milan.

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 disadvantage 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 culture, because this is our best chance of contributing something significant. Many important studies in our field have grown out of this intercultural situation.

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

How can we make visible the borders that are to be negotiated in our teaching? 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 the same terms in the study of different literatures.

We therefore have to draw attention to the borders that have to be negotiated. But how? I see three possibilities in particular:

The first is the most obvious.

Wherever there is an opportunity for intercultural reference in our courses we should seize it.

The second is literary translation from English into the students' mother tongue. This makes them juxtapose the two cultures.

The third possibility concerns methodology. We can try out an approach common in English studies (for example, 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 as a discipline, we rarely articulate these in academic discourse. There are also shared traditions, of course (the Classics, for example); there are convergences. 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 difference may be made fruitful to all concerned. As such these juxtapositions also contribute to further convergence. One of the great opportunities of Europe, after all, is learning how to negotiate difference. The present situation makes us consider alternatives; it teaches us to be flexible; and it opens our minds.

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