
“Feeling that the Room Had No Walls” Ecopoiesis and Moya Cannon’s Dwelling Spaces

Megan Buckley (National University of Ireland, Galway)

The 2008 conference of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures (IASIL) convened in July in Porto, Portugal, where presentations and keynote lectures were focused around the theme “Home and elsewhere: the spaces of Irish writing.” This theme gave rise to a range of interpretations of, and meditations on, the idea of dwelling and absence; of exile and homecoming; of boundaries both established and transgressed – including a number of papers on ecopoetics and the work of Irish women writers such as Paula Meehan, Biddy Jenkinson, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, and Eavan Boland. As Kate Rigby notes in her article “Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis,” the term *ecopoiesis* translates from the Greek as “a making of the dwelling-place,”¹ so it is no surprise that many of these papers engaged with both the construction and breakdown of human dwelling-spaces in poetry by Irish women. In the midst of a post-Celtic-Tiger economy, the Irish landscape of the twenty-first century has already succumbed to overdevelopment, a land of housing estates, shopping malls and business parks—‘liminal’ structures which, for all the capital they produce, do not contribute much to locating a still-elusive sense of Irish identity. The papers on ecopoetry presented at the IASIL 2008 conference provide multiple perspectives on poetry, place, structure and dwelling in contemporary Ireland, and it is this lively, complicated, urgent discourse to which this essay hopes to contribute by considering creativity and the dwelling-space within the poetry of Moya Cannon.

Cannon was born in Dunfanaghy in County Donegal, the northernmost area of the Republic of Ireland, but has lived and worked in Galway for over two decades. A former editor of *Poetry Ireland Review*, she is the author of three collections of poetry: *Oar* (Salmon Press, 1990; Gallery Press, 2000), which received the Brendan Behan Memorial Prize; *The*

Parchment Boat (The Gallery Press, 1997), and most recently *Carrying the Songs* (Carcenet, September 2007). Despite Cannon’s prominence, relatively few scholarly pieces have been devoted to her work. Among the most notable are those by Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, Christine Cusick, and Donna Potts, all of which focus on Cannon’s engagement with the “nonhuman” landscape. As Cusick notes, “in both *Oar* (1990; 2000) and *The Parchment Boat* (1997), Cannon’s poetry extends a liberating commitment to the materiality of Ireland’s landscape as a presence that both contains and enables the stories of personal, political, and natural pasts. Her verse represents nonhuman nature as subject and participant in the stories of a landscape and in the landscape of stories.”²

Cannon herself makes a similar observation in her essay “The Poetry of What Happens”:

Almost from the start the metaphors available to me related to landscape, language, and place-names, that most tangible of etymologies, the interface between language and landscape. I have always wondered how, among all the possible names, one adheres to a place; how such a tacit consensus is arrived at. Some criterion of oppositeness applies which is very similar to that which applies in the writing of poetry – it is the salient description, which sticks, as if somehow the land has colluded in writing the poem of itself and the people who lived on it.³

Here, word and landscape are inseparable; how, Cannon seems to wonder in her poetry, is it possible to “speak the earth”—or, in critic Kate Rigby’s words, “...[H]ow then can the poet speak of things in a way that allows them their own being?”⁴

Before addressing this question, it might be helpful – if challenging – to seek a working definition of ecopoetry. While definitions of ecopoetry are constantly being revised, expanded, and problematized, J. Scott Bryson provides a three-part definition in his seminal work, *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (2002) that may be of use. “The first characteristic [of ecopoetry]”, according to Bryson,

is an emphasis on maintaining an ecocentric perspective that recognises the interdependent nature of the world; such a perspective leads to a devotion to specific places and to the land itself, along with those creatures that share it with humankind. This awareness of the world as a community tends to produce the second attribute of ecopoetry: an imperative toward humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature... Related to this humility is the third attribute of ecopoetry: an intense scepticism concerning hyperrationality, a scepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an over technologised world.⁵

If this interpretation seems to be a bit too vague and all-encompassing – for, arguably, a great deal of poetry that might not be labelled with the prefix *eco-* “recognises the interdependent nature of the world” and displays “an imperative towards humility” in a variety of ways – we must nonetheless commend Bryson for attempting to identify a few unifying characteristics of a concept that is fluid and unfixed and that, necessarily, varies from poet to poet. For Cannon’s poetry, the second tenet of Bryson’s definition is most readily visible, in that Cannon does not attempt to address the concept of landscape tidily, or to frame it within with any form of personal or political agenda – which, as she puts it herself, would be “the violence of trying to deconstruct the core of beauty.”⁶ Christine Cusick agrees: “In Cannon’s poetry,” she writes, “national and political expression are secondary, if at all present, to the unruly pervasiveness of the natural terrain.”⁷ Landscape, in fulfilment of one of Bryson’s principles of ecopoetry, exists “organically” in her work, so to speak, as the result of an awareness born out of humility. Sean Mac Reamoinn addresses this awareness in a review of *Oar*, Cannon’s first collection, in which he notes “a remarkable symbiosis of humanity and the ‘natural world’”⁸. One of the principal locations of this intersection between “humanity and the natural world” is found within dwelling-spaces or structures, and other ‘artefacts’, an intersection that is seldom addressed in previous critical assessments of Cannon’s work. Naturalist Robert Lloyd Praeger describes this intersection, or symbiosis, thus:

It is... the Ireland of the man who goes with reverent feet through the hills and valleys, accompanied by neither noise nor dust to scare away wild creatures, stopping often, watching closely, listening carefully.

Only thus can he, if he is fortunate, make friends by degrees with the birds and flowers and rocks, learn all the signs and sounds of the country-side, and at length feel at one with what is, after all, his natural environment. And I hold that in this mood he will also be better fitted for due appraisal of the many monuments of man’s industry and faith that he will meet in this Ireland of ours, be it a cairn of the Bronze Age, a medieval church, or some marvel of modern science.⁹

Cannon’s literary footprints on Ireland’s landscape are just as reverent as Praeger’s; nowhere more so than in “First Poetry”, from *Carrying the Songs*, in which the shapes made by the wings of flying birds form the letters of a language:

These were, perhaps, the original poetry
swallows, terns, or grey-lag geese,
returning, unnoticed at first,
over the sea’s rim,
or through the same dip in the hills,
in tune with the lift and fall of the seasons...¹⁰

or in “Oysters” from *The Parchment Boat* (1997), a meditation on, to borrow a phrase of Rigby’s, the “unsayability” of non-human nature:

for no one knows what joy the stone holds
in its stone heart,
or whether the lark is full of sorrow
as it springs against the sky.
What do we know, for instance,
of the ruminations of the oyster
which lies on the estuary bed –
not the rare, tormented pearl-maker,
just the ordinary oyster?
Does it dream away its years?

Or is it hard,
This existence where salt and river water mix?¹¹

But when Cannon moves from the non-human landscape to an engagement with human dwelling-places, the result is more troubled and unsettled in tone. While Cannon’s poetic subjects are “at home” enough within the non-human landscape to attempt a reverent articulation or envoicing of that landscape and to seek within it that “awareness of community” of Bryson’s, man-made structures are sites of discomfort; the act of dwelling within four walls provides no security, but complicates and destabilizes instead.

To understand why this destabilization of the man-made structure is poetically necessary and important, it may be helpful to consider Rigby’s reading of Heidegger’s theories of dwelling in

her article “Earth, World, Text: On The (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis.” Here, building upon the work of Jonathan Bate in *Song Of The Earth* (2000), Rigby asks “whether there could ever be a creative practice and a critical methodology that do not fall short of giving voice of the natural world,” and suggests that ecopoetry might provide the answer, in that “poetry is the original admission of dwelling.”¹² Drawing on Heidegger’s essays, including “The Origins Of The Work Of Art”, “...Poetically Man Dwells...”, and “What Are Poets For?”, Rigby’s article explores the ways in which art – here, specifically poetry – frees the natural world from an assessment of worth based on the resources it provides to humans, which Heidegger calls a *Gestell* or ‘enframing’. This matrix must be relinquished in favour of another; a matrix of conscious dwelling, which involves “attuning oneself in that which one thinks, does, and makes to that which is given with earth and sky; that is, a particular natural environment.”¹³ This, according to Heidegger (and Rigby) is itself an art:

For although, in Heidegger, dwelling involves an attunement to the given, it itself is not given, either by place of birth or ancestral belonging, even if your dwelling place does in fact happen to be that of your forefathers. Heidegger is quite emphatic about this: dwelling is an achievement, something which we have to learn again and again, something which involves conscious commitment, not something that is in any sense ‘in the blood’... [I]t becomes apparent that some form of exile or at least defamiliarization is intrinsic to dwelling. We must first encounter the absence or obscurity of a place before we can begin to attune ourselves to it in dwelling. The poet admits us into dwelling precisely to the extent that she allows even the most familiar things to appear in all their strangeness, as if encountered for the first time. Only thus might things cease to be mere equipment; only thus might they be revealed as ... the matrix of our dwelling.¹⁴

However, Rigby continues, the way in which Heidegger privileges language is problematic; if, “it is only within the *logos* of the word that the otherwise undisclosed being of things is revealed”, then humans are necessarily segregated from the non-human world – and thus, the non-human world is still forced into the confines of a *Gestell*, where the *Gestell* is language.¹⁵ Rigby believes Heidegger himself provides a solution to this problem in “The Origin

of the Work or Art”, in which he suggests that “the world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world.”¹⁶ This takes place in several ways, including what Heidegger calls *das Verschlossene*, “that which withdraws and remains hidden.”¹⁷ In Cannon’s poetry, I believe, man-made structures such as houses are the sites of this defamiliarization. There, Cannon’s poetic subjects encounter that “absence or obscurity” that, according to Heidegger, is essential to discovering the *Heimat*, to coming home, in a sort of home-making through home-breaking. The earth – the non-human landscape – creeps or seeps into both the work of art and the human dwelling-space; it thrusts itself up into it, both “ground”-ing and unsettling it with its presence. Perhaps this is why dwelling is both an art and a challenge. The broken or unfinished house – the house beneath which the ground shifts, the unsettled house, the house that is in the process of becoming no more – is, for Cannon, the only kind of dwelling-space that exists; for her poetic subjects, the breaking down of the house is the means to discovering the art of dwelling within a landscape. The erection and subsequent collapse of the human dwelling-space is necessary for Cannon’s successful enunciation of creativity or poetic inspiration.

When Cannon’s poems consider both the interiors and exteriors of domestic or manmade structures, those structures are never intact, complete, or fully formed; rather, they almost always describe a structure that is being torn down, has been torn down, or that is only partially built – which, in the words of William Howarth, is analogous to the very discipline of ecocriticism, which “...stresses the relations of nature and literature as shifting, moving shapes – a house in progress, perhaps, unfinished and standing in a field.”¹⁸ In *Oar*, Cannon’s first collection, this is visible in poems such as “After the Burial”, in which a grieving Traveller family turns its caravan into a funeral pyre for a matriarch after her death; they stand by and watch while the vehicle burns down to its chassis. Similarly, in “Foundations”, builders digging the foundations for a kitchen in a new house discover a heap of seashells under the concrete, “taciturn clams” that “break their

silence” to warn their evictors that human lives are no less precarious than the molluscs.

“Demolition”, from *Carrying the Songs*, Cannon’s most recent volume of poetry, is set against the backdrop of an abandoned city house, where several of the poetic subject’s funda-mental human needs – shelter, food, and love – go unfulfilled. Here, the narrator regards the house with the distance of a stranger, yet with the lonely intimacy of being the last witness to a vanishing world. “On the gable of the adjoining house/ at first-floor level, high above the people running to work”, she stands among the debris of what was another woman’s kitchen: “a black smudge where the range used to be,” “a recess with six shelves”, “a bag of self-raising flour”, “a tin of Royal Baking Powder/ and a glass salt cellar.”¹⁹ Once these were accoutrements of nourishment, but are now useless and inanimate without the heat of a stove. In the white space between stanzas, the reader is given room to process this inventory before she is asked to take stock of the profound groundlessness – or otherworldly “thingliness,” to use Rigby’s phrase, that underlies these once-homely objects:

And something about this hurts badly
but I don’t know what
or why I now remember waking at four in the morning,
long ago, the day after a love ended abruptly,
feeling that the room had no walls...²⁰

In “Demolition”, small domestic objects “appear in all their strangeness, as if encountered for the first time”, and the house is defamiliarized, destabilized: “the winds of the world blew across my bed”, the narrator confesses; “I had no shelter or hope of shelter”.²¹ Rigby, following Michael Haar, observes that the idea of the earth as unsayable “is perhaps more thoroughly Rilkean than Heideggerian” in its “‘assent... to the inexpressibility of Earthly presence itself.’”²² Indeed, the last stanza of Rilke’s poem “*Herbsttag*” might be read as just such as assent, in which it is, I believe, no accident that the poetic subject, like the narrator of “Demolition”, is homeless, exposed:

He who has no house will never build one now.
He who is alone will remain so for many days,
he will be wakeful, watchful, read, write long letters
and will wander peacefully through the alleys
as the leaves play down.²³

But for the speaker of “Demolition”, encountering this “exposed, vanished house”, the dishevelled nineteenth-century bedrooms are not the source of betrayal, but rather the stomach or “gut” of the house, the “sliced-off kitchen,/ the abandonment/ of leaven and savour.”²⁴ The internal landscapes of both humans and houses are capable of betrayal, of erosion, and of decay.

Even shelters created by animals are not exempt from instability in Cannon’s poetry; birds’ nests survive only precariously – at least when in close proximity to a human house, as in “Crow’s Nest”, from Cannon’s first, book, *Oar*, or are built “out of habit” by an primitive, animal-like God, only to be uninhabitable, to be abandoned and tangled with human refuse, as in “Nest”, also from *Oar*:

Two Coke cans and a fast-foot carton
are wound into the heart of it.

Out of habit,
god goes on making nests.²⁵

There is one exception to this in Cannon’s work, however; the only instance in which a man-made structure is not the site of defamiliarization or unease, when the earth seems to “thrust itself up” into the world of the house in a more positive, symbiotic way, is when it is built from the start to be incomplete, as in “Easter Houses”, from *The Parchment Boat*. The “Easter house” in question is a low roofless structure children build with blocks of turf they dig themselves. In the last weeks of repentance and self-sacrifice before Easter, as death prepares to renew itself into life, they “hack sods out of the grass/ and stack them among trees/ into four low walls” that they might have a place to “boil eggs outside”.²⁶ Here, the very impermanence and rough functionality of the Easter house – both of which have been recognised by its young builders – is what allows it to act as a vessel for renewal: after a winter of enclosure, “life had come out again to nest in the open;/ again, the shell was chipped from within.”²⁷ The humility inherent in this awareness of impermanence is suggestive of a deep if elusive spiritual truth: that the need for enclosure reflects the longing for perceptible security – an impossibility in a world that is ever fluctuating. Real spirituality, real enlightened creativity, is not

born in hiding, but begins with an appreciation, if not full comprehension, of a fundamental groundlessness and instability. In “Easter Houses”, unlike “Demolition”, the structure’s purpose does not go unfulfilled because it was built without attachments, with an acceptance of the primacy of the landscape around it. Even so, it too must be torn down in the end.

Perhaps, for Cannon, profound creativity can only be plumbed after these perceptive barriers have been torn down, making both erection and demolition a vital part of the evolution of poetic – especially ecopoetic – creativity as a renewable resource. This unsettledness, defamiliarization and eventual demolition stems from the “unsayability” of the natural world, what Heidegger, via Rigby, refers to as “the unfathomable givenness of a self-disclosing (and thereby also self-concealing) earth and sky that calls us to respond with word and song...”²⁸ The ability of the nonhuman world to both conceal and reveal itself in the work of art is also described by William Rueckert, with reference to the ecopoetry of Gary Snyder and Adrienne Rich, thus: “What the poets do,” he writes, “is ‘hold it close’ and then ‘give it all away.’”²⁹ The necessity of defamiliarization, of being unsettled by our surroundings, is precisely what brings us closer to the homeland we seek, closer to apprehending dwelling as an art, not as a conquest. And the tension that arises from these symbioses – building/unbuilding, concealing/revealing, holding close/giving away – makes, in William Rueckert’s words, a poem “a verbal equivalent of fossil-fuel (stored energy) ... ever-living, inexhaustible sources of stored energy...”³⁰

NOTES

Megan Buckley is a Doctoral Teaching Fellow in the English Department at NUIG, where she also received her M.A. in Writing. Her poetry has been published in the US, the UK, and Ireland, and she is the author of two books on wine and cocktails. Before moving to Ireland in 2004, she worked as a literary agent in her native New York. A version of this article was delivered at the 2008 conference of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literature (IASIL).

1. Kate Rigby, “Earth, World, Text: On The (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis”, *New Literary History* (2004: 35), 440.
2. Christine Cusick, “Our Language Was Tidal: Moya Cannon’s Poetics of Place” in *New Hibernia Review/Iris Ireannach Nua*, (9:1, 2005), 74.
3. Moya Cannon, “The Poetry of What Happens”, *Myself, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001, 131.

When Cannon engages with dwelling-spaces in her poetry, she taps into this energy; and in her awareness of the impermanence of the man-made structure in its place within the non-human world, she also illustrates the first tenet of Bryson’s definition of ecopoetry; that “ecocentric perspective that recognises the interdependent nature of the world”, which, writes Rigby, Heidegger defines as “harmony”:

...earth is implicit in the work as that matrix or ‘harmony’ (Einklang) which supports the relation of all natural beings, including, I would add (although Heidegger does not), human beings in their corporal interconnectedness with other beings.³¹

It also serves as a metaphor for the creation of ecopoetry itself, while acting as a reminder that no manmade structure can protect us from the tides and cycles of our inner, or outer, landscapes.

Both the critical conversations on the place and purpose of ecopoetry at IASIL 2008, and Kate Rigby’s article “Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis”, articulate what I believe to be the goal of ecocriticism and ecopoetry: ‘How can a work of art, a thing of human making’, writes Rigby, ‘or, as the Greeks put it, *poiesis*, speak, and in speaking ‘save’ the earth?’³² Moya Cannon’s poetry works toward an answer to this brave question by challenging the stability of human dwelling-spaces, a challenge that is necessary for both the “unconcealment” of poetic creativity and for the art of conscious dwelling, in Ireland and beyond. As Cannon concludes her essay ‘The Poetry Of What Happens’, “...language and stones have been very kind to me and have led me to many rich encounters. I can only ask that they continue to do so.”³³

4. Rigby, 436.
5. J. Scott Bryson in *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems* ed. Neil Astley. (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2007), 14.
6. Moya Cannon, "The Poetry of What Happens", *Myself, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 128.
7. Cusick, 74.
8. Website of The Gallery Press, <<http://www.gallerypress.ie/Authors/Mcannon/Books/mco.html>>, accessed 15 September 2008.
9. Robert Lloyd Praeger, *The Way That I Went*. (Cork, The Collins Press, 2001), 2-3.
10. Moya Cannon, "First Poetry," *Carrying the Songs*. (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), 17, lines 1-6.
11. Moya Cannon, "Oysters", *Carrying the Songs*. (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), 92, lines 4-15.
12. Rigby, 428.
13. Rigby, 430-431.
14. Rigby, 432.
15. Rigby, 433.
16. Rigby, 436. Rigby continues, "This interrelationship between world and earth is the nexus from which the work of art originates, in Heidegger's account. Moreover, it is in the work of art that this interrelationship is made manifest. For the work of art itself "sets up" (*aufstellt*) a work, while at the same time it "sets forth" (*herstellt*) the earth, disclosing it, that is, as a ground. Thus, "[the] work of art moves the earth itself into the open region of a world and keeps it there."
17. Heidegger in Rigby, 436.
18. William Howarth, "Some Principles of Ecocriticism" in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. (Athens, GA, USA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 71.
19. Moya Cannon, "Demolition" in *Carrying the Songs*. (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), 20, lines 1-3, 5-6, 8.
20. Cannon, "Demolition", lines 10-14.
21. Cannon, "Demolition", lines 16-17.
22. Michael Haar in Rigby, 437.
23. My translation from the German of the last stanza of 'Herbsttag':
Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr.
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben,
wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben,
und wird in den Alleen hin und her
unruhig wandern, wenn die Blätter treiben.
Rainer Maria Rilke, "Herbsttag", in *The Best of Rilke*, trans. Walter Arndt. (Hanover, NH, USA: University Press of New England, 1989.)
24. Cannon, "Demolition", lines 18, 21-23.
25. Cannon, "Nest" in *Carrying the Songs*. (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), 77, lines 7-8.
26. Moya Cannon, "Easter Houses", *The Parchment Boat*. (Gallery Press, etc), page number, lines 3-5, 7-8.
27. Cannon, "Easter Houses", lines 11-12.
28. Rigby, 433.
29. William Rueckert, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. (Athens, GA, USA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 116.
30. Rueckert, 108.
31. Rigby, 436.
32. Rigby, 428.
33. Cannon, "The Poetry of What Happens", 131.

Comparing Cultures: Our Subtext

François Poirier (Université Paris 13, France)

Abstract

Dealing with the products of a foreign language, literature and culture as most of us do in ESSE, raises two distinct, but interrelated issues. The first is that we have to learn how to decipher all the unseen elements which the native speaker, reader and writer would take for granted, all those cultural scribblings in the margins, non-verbal meanings and incidental references which indicate how much the uses of a language, whether scholarly or vulgar, are steeped into the history of the surrounding society. The second is that our public will always compare what we tell them of things English with what they know of their own society or what they believe they know about any society, and this spontaneous exercise is likely to reproduce and confirm the worst clichés on which national identities feed and thrive. These two issues raise a further question, which is: how far should the relevant informative and corrective teaching be an academic subject in its own right? and not only a subject of teaching, but a subject of research. What has hindered its development for a long while? Why is it now on the rise?

There are so many things everybody believes she or he knows perfectly well, and probably does in a way, so many all too obvious notions. There is so much taken for granted, that a little critical review from time to time may prove a healthy exercise.

Dialogue of the deaf

Whatever we try to do, our students compare what we teach them about the English-speaking world, and their yardstick for such a comparative exercise is simply their stock of representations of their own culture and of its relationship to other cultures. We can decide, as was the fashion in language teaching in the 1970s, to abolish any reference whatsoever to the home culture of students, but it is to no avail, because we address people who are already socialised in their own culture, whose very identity, both collective and personal, is made up of a stock of stereotypical representations of self and otherness. They can learn a lot, they can qualify their representations, they cannot altogether dispense with them, or if they can, it is at the cost of a personal cultural revolution which very few of them will experience.

When they engage in this spontaneous comparative exercise, they compare an isolated element taken from English culture, about whose context they know only the very little you have had time enough to teach them, to an element of their own culture which is naturally associated with the complex context, with the historical depth (even when they have no serious historical background), with the network of meanings, that make up that very culture. Such a comparative exercise is generally performed to the detriment of the foreign culture, and entrenches the stereotypical visions of the alien society supposedly under scrutiny. This is encapsulated in the phrase of Asterix and Obelix regarding their foreign enemy: “*Ils sont fous ces Romains!*”

— Those Romans, they're loony. After which the need for further explanations and analyses is quenched for good.

There is absolutely no need to deplore this, for this is the way the human mind operates. Apparently hopeless surveys have been conducted in French schools to gauge whether any change in the representation of those foreign cultures whose language had been studied was perceptible among students. And the result of such surveys is that at 11 as well as at 18, when they enter university, the same stereotypical perceptions persist.¹ I fear that the difference with the 21 year-old students pocketing their degrees is minimal. And should a survey be conducted among ESSE members, the most learned gathering on things English, the results would be very nearly the same.

They would not be entirely the same, though, because our representations are far more nuanced and qualified and enriched with all sorts of contradictions. We have learned with experience and scholarly work to go beyond the “either / or” perception of contradictions and perhaps have incorporated some dialectics in our *Weltanschauung*. We understand *in theory* that any society is varied and complex and that unsubstantiated overgeneralisation is to be avoided. Practice, though, is another matter.

For, nonetheless, we persist in believing and teaching that certain things are specific to the culture we have made a specialism of, but we rarely bother to study how specific it might be, and why. In addition, we construct our knowledge through the preconceptions of our home culture and even in Europe, with several centuries of common knowledge, this may often lead to a dialogue of the deaf, to misunderstandings of all sorts.

Allow me to take an example from outside English studies, though not completely outside. American feminists have discovered in the writings of persons like H el ene Cixous or Luce Issigaray and others something they have called French Feminism. They thought it was rather exciting and launched into all sorts of theoretical developments based on their understanding of “French Feminism”, developments that were then discovered by real French Feminists as something that bore little relation to the main trends of their thinking and activity, but which, in their turn, they found rather exciting, which launched them into new developments on the basis of what they called “American feminism”, etc. This is the case of a sort of fruitful misunderstanding, but entirely based on the generalisation of a very partial perception.²

Such stereotypical visions are obviously hyperactive in the field of caricature and satire, as in these two caricatures of the revolutionary period, one by Gillray the other one by Rowlandson, when Britain is shown as the land of plenty, of justice, of balance, and France as a country of excited, blood-thirsty, though vegetarian, ascetics. But perhaps it would seem fit that we academics went beyond such satires and caricatures. If comparison is unavoidable, if it is our constant subtext, why not turn it into a proper scientific exercise?



James Gilray, 1792



RELIGION.	MORALITY.	ATHEISM.	PERJURY
LOYALTY.	OBEDIENCE to the LAWS.	REBELION TREASON ANARCHY, MURDER.	
INDEPENDANCE.	PERSONAL SECURITY.	EQUALITY, MADNESS, CRUELTY, INJUSTICE.	
JUSTICE.	INHERITANC.	PROTECTION of	TREACHERY, INGRATITUDE, IDLENESS.
PROPERTY.	INDUSTRY.	NATIONAL PROSPERITY.	FAMINE, NATIONAL & PRIVATE RUIN.
	HAPPINESS.	WHICH IS BEST?	MISERY.

Thomas Rowlandson, 1793

The basis of sympathetic communion

This should be easier for us than for most, if only for a simple occupational reason: most of us teach a culture which is different from that of our students and often from our own. But there is an academic tradition that makes the notion congenial, and that is that the first scientific comparative methods were developed in linguistics. It is largely through a comparative exercise that the late 19th century philologists mapped out the history of languages. It is largely through a similar exercise that early 20th century linguists tried to show what was specific to each language, as well as what could be the common rules governing all languages. And the second major development in comparative approaches was that of comparative literature, of which I shall say no more for the present.

But there are two types of comparison and it may be useful not to confuse them.³ One type consists in comparing objects that may be extremely distant in time and place. The risk here is to highlight mere coincidences, but the benefit maybe to highlight phenomena that are common to the human race. And in a way this a pointer to the balance to be achieved in a comparative exercise of the second type, i.e. when comparing things that coexist at closer range, such as, for instance, national cultures within Europe. The balance will consist in discovering at the same time what is common and what is different. The tendency of the student who engages in the spontaneous comparison described earlier is to entirely disregard what is common: this is most of the time simply unseen. But when we want to compare not simply a language, established in its formality, not simply literatures, with their finite corpus, but entire societies and their cultures, we address a much more complex set of problems: here, little is formalised over a long period of time, and the corpus of documents is anything but finite, as it includes not only the written word, but the spoken one, not only the language, but all the activities of men in their relation to a landscape and to other men, all their monuments, all their everyday implements and utensils. I sometimes begin methodological classes by commenting for one full hour on a school chair or a door knob.

There is no way the vast amount of information thus considered can be simplified, and that is not the point. It has to be made sense of. It is the discovery of meaning that we are after, and, perhaps, the most useful approach is then a historical approach. This is not an entirely novel idea, since Herodotus or Tacitus touched upon it. In the 19th century, at the time of conscious nation building, it even made history into a sensitive political issue in Europe. In the States, with settlers' communities of variegated migrants, Melville mused upon the subject:

More familiarly to consort, men of a practical turn must sympathetically converse, and upon topics of real life. But, whether as to persons or events, one cannot always be talking about the present, much less speculating about the future; one must needs recur to the past, which, with the mass of men, where the past is in any personal way a common inheritance, supplies to most practical natures the basis of sympathetic communion.⁴

I must here envisage a detour with a short comment on what is termed “cultural studies”. Since the phrase was first coined by Stuart Hall in the 1960s, a lot of things have happened and the phrase is now attached to so many different meanings and approaches that I am not sure it is a safe one to use. The Birmingham Centre founded by Hall and his colleagues based its approach on the works of Raymond Williams (mostly on the history of cultural expressions), of Richard Hoggart (on the sociology of language), and also of Edward Thompson (on social and cultural history), Hall himself being a *bona fide* sociologist interested in the media and in politics.⁵ They were materialists, in the philosophical sense, and based their analyses on evidence carefully collected and criticised. Today, some “cultural studies” seem to have entirely lost this historical and sociological bearing that was the hallmark of their origins. This may be the reason why, at the ESSE conference in Aarhus, speakers at the round table convened by Jens Rasmussen were unanimous in rejecting the application of the phrase “cultural studies” to their own pursuits, while a majority preferred the bland, descriptive phrase “area studies”, which accommodates the epistemological diversity inherent in the study of complex objects.⁶

An issue of EJES is to be devoted to the uses of the past, and I do hope the Birmingham contribution, i.e. “cultural studies” old style, is taken into account, for I cannot help remembering that an enormous theoretical effort was conducted at CCCS in the early 1980s on the subject of collective memory by historians like Richard Johnson.⁷ This is simply to remind everybody that no full meaning of any human artefact, literature included, can be deciphered unless its historical and social dimensions are fully understood, and this seems to be forgotten by some. Countless examples are daily found of historical misconstructions of the context in which literary texts are produced.⁸ Some sense seems to be creeping back with “new historicism”.

The opposite of precisely analysed reality

Let us look, if you wish, at a short excerpt taken from the work of an English author, although it was originally written in Latin. But its various English translations have been so influential that I cannot place this particular work outside the field of English literature, and it is a must of any history of ideas. I want to speak of Thomas More’s *Utopia*.

[...] But I do not think that this necessity of stealing arises only from hence; there is another cause of it, more peculiar to England.’ ‘What is that?’ said the Cardinal: ‘The increase of pasture,’ said I, ‘by which your sheep, which are naturally mild, and easily kept in order, may be said now to devour men and unpeople, not only villages, but towns; for wherever it is found that the sheep of any soil yield a softer and richer wool than ordinary, there the nobility and gentry, and even those holy men, the abbots! not contented with the old rents which their farms yielded, nor thinking it enough that they, living at their ease, do no good to the public, resolve to do it hurt instead of good. They stop the course of agriculture, destroying houses and towns, reserving only the churches, and enclose grounds that they may lodge their sheep in them. As if forests and parks had swallowed up too little of the land, those worthy countrymen turn the best inhabited places into solitudes; for when an insatiable

wretch, who is a plague to his country, resolves to enclose many thousand acres of ground, the owners, as well as tenants, are turned out of their possessions by trick or by main force, or, being wearied out by ill usage, they are forced to sell them [...].⁹

Confronted with a literary and philosophical fiction like this one, you can try as much as you wish to decipher the metaphor of the carnivorous sheep, even transfer it to mad cow's disease and its ovine equivalent, you can explain that in a tradition attested by sacred texts of Jews, Christians and Muslims, sheep are meek, and that the intention is to show a paradox, you can explain everything you like in this way, but you miss the main point, which is that this text is a direct criticism of the economic and social changes at work in Thomas More's own times: the beginnings of enclosures (for speculative agriculture, as distinct from the creation of game preserves, like the New Forest), the benefice system corrupting the Church, the European market for wool, with weaving in Flanders and production in England and Southern France, the consequent shift of English agriculture away from local subsistence towards a speculative market, exporting wool and importing corn (until the 20th c. in fact), the higher productivity of a new agriculture requiring a lesser number of labourers, the consequent eviction of thousands of peasants, hence the development of vagrancy and the special criminality attached to it, the social condemnation of so-called "sturdy beggars"¹⁰ before the Industrial Revolution (which More does not foresee) finds ways of employing them. Over a longer term system of references, an indirect indictment of the effects of the Norman conquest is to be found: forests and parks were created by the Norman¹¹ kings and nobility, who were the main beneficiaries of the concentration of property ensuing from the dispossession of the vanquished Saxon nobility. This inference has an implication: the illegitimacy of the Tudor ruling class, who inherited their power from alien usurpers,¹² a theme that is going to be harped upon by many protest movements until the early 19th c. Such historical elements are the main clue to the understanding of the text. From this, you conclude that More's *Utopia* is not an absurd dream, it is simply the exact opposite of the reality of his time, which he analyses very precisely.

On a similar subject, there is another very famous text, some two centuries and half later, by Oliver Goldsmith, "The Deserted Village", condemning "trade's unfeeling train" and "cumbrous pomp".

Ill fares the land, to hast'ning ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay:
Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;
A breath can make them, as a breath has made:
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,
When once destroy'd, can never be supplied.
A time there was, ere England's griefs began,
When every rood of ground maintain'd its man;

For him light labour spread her wholesome store,
Just gave what life requir'd, but gave no more:
His best companions, innocence and health;
And his best riches, ignorance of wealth.¹³

Again, it is possible to dwell on the poem, as well as on the prose version which Goldsmith wrote, by discussing the eternal moral value of simple rustic frugality as opposed to idle opulence, and thereby miss one of the points Goldsmith wanted to make. We are in the last run of enclosures, when vast commercial and industrial fortunes have been made by people who are either already large landowners (they receive rent from the budding industries, and venture a few pounds in the highly lucrative international, including slave, trade), or are new upstarts, desirous of acquiring the “rolling acres” that will give them the status their purses allow them to aspire to. Their problem is no longer primarily to make the whole land pay, with an agricultural produce that can be sold for profit, but it is to have a show place, where the extremely aristocratic art of hunting (for sport, not for food) can be practised at ease. It is the time when a turn of the screw has been given to game laws, when those who hunt for food are poachers risking jail and even death.¹⁴ It is the time when the shift away from subsistence agriculture towards speculative activities becomes final; the time when more and more in the vagrant population are turning Gipsy or highwaymen—Goldsmith himself had done a lot of tramping across Europe—when the administration of the Elizabethan Poor Law becomes quite impossible and horrendously expensive, when those vagrants are beginning to settle down in towns and cities.¹⁵ It is the time of the last peasant revolts and the first urban riots, the time of the first organised pressure, by private and public institutions, in favour of mass transatlantic emigration (including “transportation across the high seas to His Majesty’s colonies or plantations”), the time when France and Britain still contend for remote territories in America and Asia, despite the 1763 settlement. The text is about nostalgia for a lost paradise, which, in fact, never existed,¹⁶ and an acute criticism of the worst aspects of the present. In that sense, it is very, very different from Thomas More’s progressive vision, although it was written about ten generations later. It looks to the past, where More was looking to the future.

Surely, it would be more difficult to understand such texts and their differences without the historical dimension I have briefly delineated, and most scholars would do just that. But it is only with the comparison of the two documents that their deep ideological difference is brought to light.

Revealing the invisible

I have been comparing these two literary documents¹⁷ in the sense of the first type of comparison envisaged earlier, that is, comparing two things quite remote in time, though pertaining to the same place and the same phenomenon. This has enabled us to see that, behind the condemnation of the same groups of people and of their social practice, very different visions may lie. Not

bad, but very limited and nearly obvious. Let us now envisage the second type of comparison, when you compare objects of the same period and in relative physical proximity.

Marc Bloch defined this type of comparison in this way:

[...] To make a parallel study of societies that are at once neighbouring and contemporary, exercising a constant mutual influence, exposed throughout their development to the action of the same broad causes just because they are close and contemporaneous, and owing their existence in part at least to a common origin.¹⁸

The first thing that such a comparison, including the study of mutual influences, allows us to do is to find out things that are often overlooked, or even quite invisible. Such invisibility is not an effect of the absence of objects, but of the absence of the right angle of vision, that would allow us to see them. When we are studying a culture from within itself, and even when we try to step back and obtain a higher view, there is so much we instinctively take for granted and overlook, that only the jarring elements brought about by the comparative exercise allow us to look where we had not looked before.

For instance, when I compare the rhetoric of those French and English writers who defended the slave-trade in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, I discover that they did not respond to the same abolitionist attack: despite the links between French and English abolitionist organisations, their discourse was very different, worded in terms of Christian humaneness in England, in terms of the universal and equal rationality of men in France. The English debated on the question of whether the Holy Scriptures authorised slavery, the French on the issue of whether men born equal should remain equally free. Or on the same theme, when comparing the Guinea traders of Liverpool in England and Nantes in France, I find that the Liverpool ones were very vocal, organised all sorts of petitions, but quickly resigned themselves to the end of the slave-trade, for they had a much more profitable and far less risky alternative: the transport of emigrants to the new world. Carrying people across the seas, whether they are free or unfree, requires the same basic technology and organisation. But the unfree, have to be paid for, fed, manacled on a long trip through risky climates. Whereas free passengers pay their passage, provide most of their own food (at the beginning of mass emigration, this was the case) and do not need any irons to be carried on a shorter voyage through the temperate zone. When a slave dies, it is a waste of capital. When a free emigrant dies, it is a saving on investment.

The Christian homilies of the English abolitionists met with success not only because they convinced a Christian nation, but also because those who stood to be the net losers readily found lucrative alternatives. The fact that the prosperity of the country was understood to be safe even without the slave-trade or even slavery probably liberated the signature of many a prudent, cautious, low profile Briton, thus able to reconcile righteousness and self-interest. Worse than this, some discovered that they could still participate in the slave trade, but without running any risks, simply by manufacturing and selling for ready cash to the Portuguese all

these nice instruments of torture without which the slave-trade would not have been half as pleasant. Until about 1840, a number of Portuguese or Brazilian slave ships seized by the British navy were found to have been fully equipped anew at Liverpool.

But the French shipowners had very little emigration to service: Louisiana was sold to the United States in 1803, Canada and India had been lost to the English in 1763, there simply was nowhere to go, except the small West Indian islands and Senegal. Slavers were reduced to silence by the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 and the abolition of slavery in 1794—and so were abolitionists. It is only through the pressure of West Indian planters that slavery was reinstated in 1802, while the slave-trade proved, in time of war, too difficult for a French maritime capability that ceased to match the English after Trafalgar in 1805.¹⁹ It became easy for Napoleon, during his 100-day return to power, to pronounce an end of the trade—if not of slavery itself—in the hope of placating European public opinion and renewing links with the men and women of 1789. In short, the English slavers resisted abolition as long as they could against mounting adverse and massive public opinion, but converted quickly to other pursuits when a Parliamentary majority declared for abolition, whereas the French slavers had absolutely no means of resisting abolition, nor any profitable alternative. Especially as they were enmeshed in an ideological contradiction: they could not really continue to use the rhetoric of metaphorical slaves revolting against tyranny, while being all too real tyrants to real slaves. Their alternative was even less of emigration after 1815, as social pressure went against it: postwar demography demanded that young energetic people stay at home. At the same time, French abolitionists could not really express their views prior to the 1848 Revolution: there was too much to “liberate” on the home front, they were swamped, except briefly in 1794, by the flood of events and slogans in which the opposition slaves/tyrants was perceived as mostly domestic.²⁰

The exercise shows that, under the same type of pressure—an enlightened public opinion drive against slavery—the French and English responses were very different, and when one tries to explain these differences, one discovers further differences in the ordinary national ideology of each, in their economic circumstances, and in politics. Those could be ascribed to long-term differences in the very way each country had made itself across centuries, but there is no space for this here.²¹ These differences help us to see beyond the beauties of humane rhetoric and explain why abolitionists eventually won the day, at the same time as modern racism was emerging. Without such comparisons, we would be content to say that the Clapham sect and their Quaker friends were convincing enough, that the Christian creed proved more effective than the ideology of the Rights of Man, while Tories found this an amusing trick to undercut the influence of French revolutionists: not untrue, but shallow. Comparing has helped us reveal immediately unseen factors.²²

Eliminating wrong causes or biased interpretations

The exercise has also helped us discriminate between what was similar and what was different, between common causes and different consequences because the plurality of causes for all major events and historical transformations is such that it is extremely unlikely that their combination be the same everywhere. But one could find yet another example of this, with the issue of housing. In many countries in Europe, postwar housing developments were a new form of urbanisation, providing better amenities to city-dwellers. But they proved to be less than a blessing in terms of socialisation. For the British population, who moved from the model of individual houses to blocks of flats (or a half-way... house called “maisonettes”, i.e. piled up individual houses), everything was blamed on the height of collective buildings. For the French who moved from traditional, urban blocks of flats to prefabricated “single-family” homes, everything was blamed on the sense of isolation ensuing from this unfamiliar mode of dwelling. The problem with these two explanations is their contradiction, which you discover only when you compare. You are then forced to look further and find, on the one hand, that most people in either Britain and France did not move from traditional, respectable housing, but from unwholesome slums or the countryside; on the other that many British council estates were built on the traditional pattern of terraced “single-family” homes, while the French ones were mostly modern blocks of flats. Of course, in both countries there were abnormal excesses, as with the record-breaking high-rise buildings of Glasgow or the elongated blocks, towering over a depressing landscape in La Courneuve, but I am talking about the less extraordinary transformation of housing.

With this particular mode of comparing things, we can eliminate wrong causes or biased interpretations, and elicit the need for more complex analyses. For instance, the industrial take-off of England cannot be reduced to the development of the wool-trade, for then you would have to explain away the simultaneous development of Flanders (including Northern France), and the deindustrialisation of the Weald.²³ If you want to link the maritime power of England to the insular position of the kingdom, it is even riskier, as, first of all, England is but a segment of this island, and then, it took about 7,000 years for these insular inhabitants to create a maritime power—which lasted no more than a century and a half—and the population was so enthusiastic about it that they had to press some of them into the navy. Why was Spain the major maritime power in the 16th c., though not an island? Why was continental Germany’s naval power such a threat to England in the Edwardian period? Other factors have to be found.

Common events can be interpreted, and sometimes dated, differently. A good example may be found in a decisive event of the Second World War. The evacuation of Dunkirk by the British expeditionary force can be interpreted as a clear victory for the German army and a sign of its valour. It is, therefore, interpreted as defeat by the French, though not because of German superiority, but because of alleged desertion by the Brits.²⁴ For the Brits, however, Churchill’s

communicative skills converted this into a moral and popular victory, when all ranks of society came across the Channel to the rescue of “our” boys. The “Dunkirk spirit” can still be invoked by politicians in dire straits. During the same war, the “Fall of France” is dated differently according to interpretations, and you may find any day between 16-25 June 1940, while the end of the war in Europe used to be commemorated on 8 May 1945 in the West, and on 9 May in the East. These are, in fact, minute details, where comparison helps bring about a degree of healthy uncertainty. But the same may apply to major notions and events.



Daily Sketch, 3 June 1940



50TH ANNIVERSARY OF DUNKIRK MAY 1990

The Independent, 22 May 1990

Interaction and mutual representations

Comparison should help us find out too what is due to this form of “mutual influence” which is interaction, even, or especially in times of conflict, when each party emulates the other in order to win.²⁵ No human culture has ever developed in complete isolation from others, and as regards the relationship between Great Britain and the European continent, it has been intense over many centuries. As in the 18th and 19th century, the United Kingdom emerged as the great superpower of the world, there is not one single plot of ground in the world that has escaped British influence, but if you do not mind, I shall continue to confine my examples to Franco-British phenomena, so as to remain on familiar ground. Between the Conquest and the end of the Hundred Years’ War, it is difficult to distinguish the history of England from that of about half present-day France, and as it is the foodstuff of Elizabethan dramatists, Shakespeare in particular, I can hardly see how such history can be avoided.

In a different period, when the intense imperial rivalry between France and Britain was turned into the *Entente cordiale*, the London-Paris axis was a route of exuberant cultural exchanges which marked the lives and writings of a number of famous authors on both sides of the Channel. Even though travelling to and fro was not always pleasant, even when steam had sped the crossing:



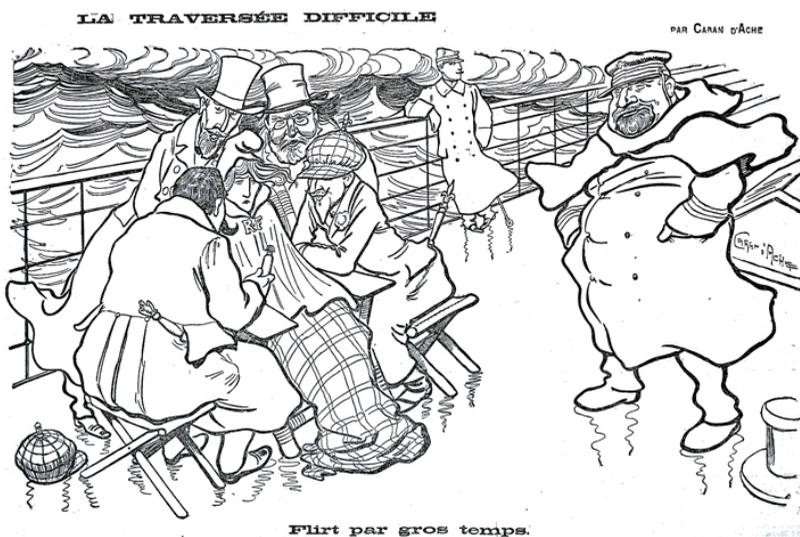
A scene on board the cross-Channel ferry La Furie, c. 1820

—well, depending on whom you met:



“The Last Evening,” by James Tissot, 1873

... which might be even worse:



**“Difficult Crossing. Flirtation in heavy weather”, by Caran d’Ache,
Le Figaro, 6 March 1899**

It nonetheless created a joint cultural phenomenon, where radical writers like Anatole France and George Bernard Shaw could play the role of international stars, and Oscar Wilde or Paul Morand could write indifferently in either French or English. No wonder the study of travel tales, literature, guidebooks, diaries, has become such a rich vein in English studies, going back

even before that to the Grand Tour from the 18th century onward—we shall go back to this later on.

But beyond the fact of actual contacts between populations, from onion Johnnies²⁶ to diplomats, from music-hall artists to famous writers, there are all sorts of influences that are at work between two neighbouring countries. It is said that, one reads that, it is rumoured that... and commercial goods go to and fro. The best tea is to be had in Paris from *La Compagnie anglaise*, football is being introduced into the rest of Europe, as well as rugby—but little of cricket except in Southwestern, anglicised France. Plays are performed on both sides of the Channel, etc.



Advertisement in *Londres en poche*, Paris: Guides pratiques Conty, 1897

All this has very much to do with mutual representations, which takes us back to the beginning of this paper. There is, though, one area of especial interest, quite a fad actually at the moment, which is the study of travel literature. There is an amusing type of mock travel literature in cross-Channel representations, exemplified in the 1950s by Pierre Daninos and his *Carnets du Major W. Marmaduke Thomson*, first published in 1958 with illustrations by the *Punch* cartoonist, Walter Goetz. This was an exercise in self-mockery by a Frenchman, where the character of an Englishman was just an excuse to highlight the ridicules (and the sensuous pleasures) of Frenchness, in the same way as Montesquieu had done with a Parsi. More recently, Peter Mayle made a name and money with his *A Year in Provence*, an acceptable mockery, and more money and less of a name with the outrageous TV series that ensued. And

quite recently, Stephen Clarke's *A Year in the Merde* was a huge success on both sides of the Channel because, in addition to being hilarious, it was a balanced exercise in the criticism of both cultures. But to go back in time, it is interesting to compare, for instance, the tales of Englishmen travelling through France at a time of war against the latter country and/or as prisoners, with the similar tales told by the French who fell into British hands at the same time. It is surprising how the two pictures that emerge are strikingly similar in the treatment of the most sombre features of the enemy's character: this is the least interesting bit, from a historical point of view, except to help us understand that the proto-history of concentration camps was began at the same time in Britain and France—not exactly the most glorious stuff to bask in. The interesting bits are in the differences in perception, rather than in the things perceived, that is to say the filter through which things are perceived, that gives an indirect insight into the authors' national cultures. This often goes deeper than the cursory description of the enemy's horrors.²⁷

More in the vein of Daninos's *Thomson*, there is an amusing literature of self-representation depicting the urban British subject which has, so far, no challenging equivalent on my side of the Channel. These books are an international success, are made into films or TV series, are translated into other languages, read avidly by teenagers... It is to be wondered what they make of it. The humour of Sue Townsend or Helen Fielding is so extremely contextualised within a very specific England that it is quite probable that young English or foreign readers do not laugh at the same situations, nor for the same reasons: this might be worth investigating, and would be a form of comparative sociology of literature.

But this leads us to an unavoidable issue, which is that of self- and mutual representations. We are constantly in a maze of such representations and it may be one of our tasks to help students make some sense of it all.

Academic and employment context

Such is our background, such is our subtext. Such are inescapable questions in terms of research.

One may ask, then, how it helps towards a better quality of teaching, when the social pressure on us is towards the teaching of so-called “communicative English”, i.e. with the culture left out, in the same way as Trevelyan once said that social history was history with the politics left out—to which Eric Hobsbawm retorted that all history was politics dressed up in period costumes.²⁸ English “with the culture left out” is, in fact, either an insidious way of permeating learners, caught unawares, with an alien culture, or an ideology, or it is a very inefficient way of teaching a language, because it is teaching to speak without having anything to say. How can you speak when you have nothing to say? Either you rely on the previously acquired culture of mature and seasoned adults, or you teach with a cultural dimension. A great deal of time is wasted trying to apply to young children and teenagers the recipes that can

work, somehow, with fully equipped adults. But they cannot work well with students who are still *personae* in the making. Recently, the French employers' association had a meeting with school inspectors for modern languages and quite bluntly said that they needed people who would understand foreign cultures.

But because of the increased demand for English lessons for all, the cheap solution is to hire young native speakers and thrust them into classrooms without any preparation—not to mention professional training.²⁹ This is short-termism at its worst. Granted, the young people's demand no longer seem to be geared towards a sort of classical education, where discussing the fine points of a sonnet counted more than doing one's sums right. But this is not to say that young people are devoid of curiosity or have ceased to be eager to understand the world, especially at a time of fast channels of international communication. If they want to learn English for "special purposes", this has to be put in its proper perspective: the particular idiom of a profession varies from language to language, obviously, from culture to culture. One has to master the specific expressions of that particular body of the language, and master them also in the home language of students. One cannot master it if one has little knowledge of the academic disciplines in which the students major. One cannot master this if one does not address the issue of the social contexts in which such language is used. Well this is a field of research combining sociology with social and cultural history, as well as the comparative history of ideas. It is challenging, it is intellectually demanding—and can be a way back to a conceptual understanding of the working of the language (i.e. linguistics), or to the passionate study of those apparently useless elements that make up the really essential references of a national culture: music, painting, literature, in both their popular and their elitist forms.

All this, of course, is only valid for the time being, when English has become the global *lingua franca*. According to some American studies, English should be superseded by Spanish in the near future, at least in terms of the number of native speakers, while China and India are expanding the economic base of their future influence. Who knows, but a 100 years from now, this preoccupation with market English will have disappeared? in the same way as Macaulay once predicted the end of British civilization, imagining the time

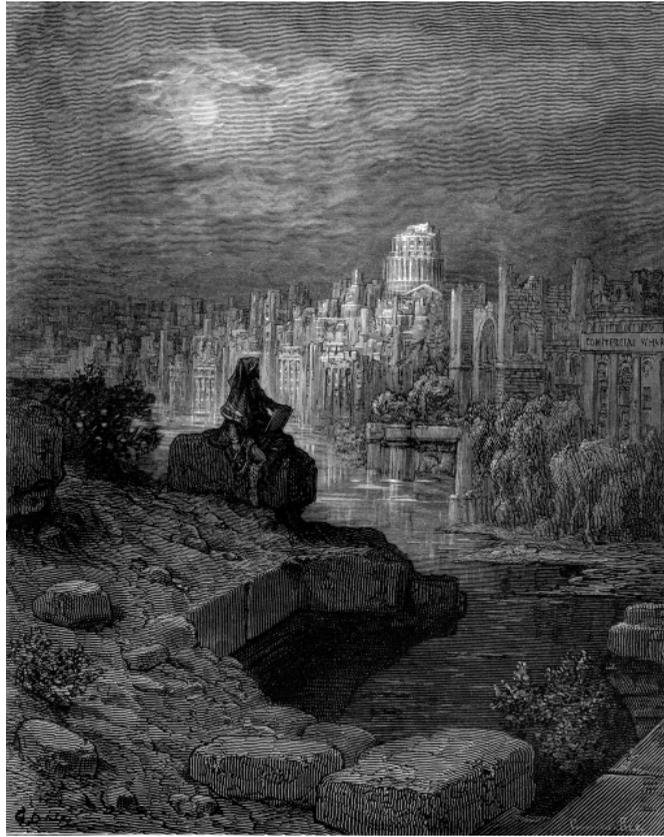
[...] when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's.³⁰

Endnote

Some colleagues will no doubt say that the proposal to resist the tide of barbarian thoughtless psittacism is entirely utopian, and might take me back to Thomas More, saying:

You have talked prettily, for a stranger,' said he, 'having heard of many things among us which you have not been able to consider well [...].³¹

But if that was food for thought, I would consider this a realistic conclusion.



Macaulay's prediction interpreted by Gustave Doré in London, a Pilgrimage, 1872

NOTES

1. See Albane CAIN and Claudine BRIANE (eds.), *Comment collégiens et lycéens voient les pays dont ils apprennent la langue. Représentations et stéréotypes*, Paris: INRP, 1994, 284 p. See also Catherine BERGER, *Des lycéens et l'anglais. Représentations sociales d'une langue étrangère. Sens et valeur d'une discipline*, PhD dissertation, Université Paris 13, 1997.

2. See Eleni VARIKAS, "Feminism, Modernity, Post-modernism: For a Dialogue across the Ocean", pp. 364-382 in... Danielle HAASE-DUBOSC, Nirupama RASTOGI *et al.* (eds.), *French Feminism. An Indian Anthology*, London: Sage, 2003, 448 p. The original French paper had been published in 1993 and Varikas broached the subject again in English with "Gender, Experience and Subjectivity: The Tilly-Scott Disagreement", *New Left Review*, I/211, May-June 1995, pp. 89-101. See also the entry by Dominique FOUGEYROLLAS-SCHWEBEL, "Feminism in the 1970s", pp. 423-446 in Christine FAURÉ (ed.), *Political and Historical Encyclopedia of Women*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, xvi+548 p.

3. This is largely indebted to the seminal paper of Marc BLOCH, "'A Contribution towards a Comparative History of European Societies,'" pp. 44-81 in J.E. ANDERSON (ed. and translator), *Land and Work in Mediaeval Europe: Selected Papers by Marc Bloch*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967. xii+260 p. The original text was a lecture delivered in 1928 at the International conference of historical science in Oslo. It was first published in *La Revue de Synthèse historique*, t. XLVI, 1928, pp. 15-50.

4. Herman MELVILLE, "John Marr", (from *John Marr and Other Sailors*, 1888), p. 312 in Harold BEAVER (ed.), *Billy Budd and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967, 466 p.

5. Raymond WILLIAMS, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (1958), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961, 350 p.; Richard HOGGART, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958, 384 p.; Edward

THOMPSON, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, 958 p.; Stuart HALL *et al.*, *Culture, media, language : working papers in cultural studies, 1972-79*, London: Hutchinson / CCCS, 1980, 311 p.

6. RT08. “History, Sociology and Politics within the Field of British Studies”. Speakers included Jens Rabek Rasmussen, Jürgen Schläger, xxx, and the present writer. Michael Parsons, Keith Dixon, Jørgen Sevaldsen and others contributed to the general discussion.

7. Richard JOHNSON *et al.* (eds.), *Making Histories—Studies in history-writing and politics*, London: Hutchinson et Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982, 379 p.

8. I remember a dignified lecturer at some prestigious do declaring that Lewis Carroll had earned little money with *Alice*, as at his death, his bank account was worth only £300. This was simply forgetting that in Charles Dodgson’s days, such a sum amounted to the full pay of an ordinary workman for 5 to 10 years. Could you today save the equivalent with the proceeds of a textbook? Or, for a comment on a scene of *Moll Flanders*, at the beginning when she is a young woman in her late teens, lusting after an equally eager young man, a pompous examiner, when drafting the benchmark, saying there was nothing hot in the scene, as Defoe was a puritan, but a moral comment on the easy deflowering of the main character for “only” 4 pounds—*i.e.* a year’s pay for a full-fledged, adult domestic servant at the time of writing the novel—and how many can resist the temptation of a year’s pay in exchange for a pleasurable half-hour? And if Defoe was a puritan, he certainly was of the spicy sort. He was also an economist of repute, and knew how to count his or others’ pennies, and the exact price of every action in human relations. See my counterblast online (in French): <www.univ-paris13.fr/CRIDAF/Textes/FPmf.PDF>.

9. The above quotation is taken from the Gutenberg.com e-text, which reproduces the popular 19th c. edition by Henry MORLEY (the first professor of English Literature), in the “Universal Library” of Routledge, later Cassell. Morley reproduces the 1684 translation by Gilbert BURNET, who, according to Morley, “was drawn to the translation of “Utopia” by the same sense of unreason in high places that caused More to write the book.” The same approach is to be found in a refreshed translation of the 1960s: Thomas MORE (Paul TURNER, ed. & trans.), *Utopia* (1516), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965, 154 p. This particular translation of the Latin original is deliberately “modern”, *i.e.* slightly anachronistic, its aim being to show More’s ideas as relevant to the translator’s contemporaries.

10. In 1597 under Elizabeth I, Parliament passed an *Act for the Punishment of Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars*. See W. BRANCH JOHNSON, *The English Prison Hulks* (1957), London & Chichester: Phillimore, 1970, x+205 p.+pl. This act was the first under English law to authorise transportation “beyond the seas” of “such Rogues as shall not be thought fit to be delivered.” See also Jan LUCASSEN, *Migrant Labour in Europe 1600-1900*, London: Croom Helm, 1987, xii+339 p.+pl. For a regulated form of wandering that was concomitant with the eviction phenomenon, see R.A. LEESON, *Travelling Brothers — The six centuries’ road from craft fellowship to trade unionism*, London: Granada, 1980, 348 p. It can be argued that such unwilling travel as that performed by vagrants or tramping artisans was essential in the formation of a popular, national culture in most European countries, as well as, together with roaming clerics and students, the first sparks of a popular European culture. Such wandering also provided an array of picturesque characters and plausible situations to 18th c. novelists like Smollett or Fielding. Strangely enough, these issues have ceased to capture the attention of historians since the late 1980s, the ground being now left entirely to lawyers, sociologists, demographers and geographers.

11. The use of the adjective “Norman” is a singularly restrictive tradition as, in fact, the invaders came from a wide swathe of Northern *Gallia*, from Brittany to present-day Flemish Belgium. Their dominant language was French, but a number spoke dialectal forms of Breton, Dutch, and the peculiar lingo of Normandy, a form of French spiced up with Scandinavian words. The whole bunch described themselves as Franks (or *Françi* in Latin) and the Saxons as Angles (Latin *Angli*).

12. This may be the main reason why More chose to write his squib in Latin, so as to confine its distribution to an international circle of scholars whose power-wielding was minimal, and thereby escape censorship—or worse.

13. First published 1770. Lines 51-62. The text being in the public domain, there are countless editions on the web and in print. The original was dedicated to Sir Joshua Reynolds.

14. The “Black Act” had been passed in 1723, and its scope extended in successive amendments, until its repeal in 1827 and the new Game Act of 1831. See E. P. THOMPSON, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the*

Black Act, London : Allen Lane, 1975, 313p.+pl. See also John RULE, *Albion's People. English Society 1714-1815*, London: Longman, 1992, xvi+269 p.

15. See arch-classic J.L. and Barbara HAMMOND, *The Town Labourer* (1917), London: Longman, 1978, xlviii+238 p., particularly chapter 3. See also classic George RUDÉ, *The Crowd in History* (1964), London: Serif, 1995, viii+279 p.; also *Paris and London in the 18th Century—Studies in Popular Protest* (1952), London: Fontana/Collins, 1970, 350 p. Or less ancient John STEVENSON, *Popular Disturbances in England 1700-1832*, London: Longman, 1979, 1992, xii+347 p.

16. See particularly chapter 4 in Roy PORTER, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982, 1990, xvi+420 p. As against Peter LASLETT, *The World We Have Lost* (1965), 3rd edn. as *The World We Have Lost further explored*, London: Routledge, 1983, xviii+353 p.

17. I generally refrain from using literary extracts for such purposes. I consider that, although authors can never entirely escape their historical time and place, they cannot be reduced to them. If they produce literature, then they are also idiosyncratic, or it would not be “literature”. This is why I contend that better history is written with the use of mediocre literature or unliterary productions. Using literary documents in a historical approach is possible, of course, but it is far more difficult. What has just been done here, though, is different, as I have developed the opposite process, of using historical contextualisation to throw some light on literary documents.

18. Marc BLOCH, *loc. cit.*, pp. 47-48.

19. See LOUIS GARNERAY, *Voyages, Aventures et Combats* (1851), Paris: Payot, 1. *Corsaire de la République*, 1991, 357 p. 2. *Le négrier de Zanzibar*, 1992, 303 p. 3. *Un corsaire au bague (Mes pontons)*, 1992, 389 p. His accidental (or so he wrote) slaving venture in Zanzibar led him directly into a prisoners' hulk off Portsmouth.

20. For an insight into the size of abolitionist opinion in France and Britain, see Seymour DRESCHER, “Public Opinion and the Destruction of British Colonial Slavery”, pp. 22-48 in James WALVIN (ed.), *Slavery and British Society 1776-1846*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982, vi+272 p.

21. See Jeremy BLACK, *Convergence or Divergence? Britain and the Continent*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994, xii+316 p. This provides a good background historical study of the specificity of Britain in Europe, from Caesar to Thatcher.

22. In addition to Seymour Drescher's paper quoted above, one could add his other paper “British Way, French Way: Opinion Building and Revolution in the Second Slave Emancipation”, *The American Historical Review*, xcvi (1991), pp. 709-34, and his book *Capitalism and Antislavery: British mobilization in comparative perspective : the second Anstey memorial lectures in the University of Kent at Canterbury*, 1984, Basingstoke : Macmillan, 1986, xv+300 p. A response of sorts to Eric WILLIAMS, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1994, viii+285 p. See also Reoger ANSTEY, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1769-1810*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Humanities Press, 1975, xxiv+456 p. It can be argued that the whole debate has been generated by comparative questioning.

23. See Pat HUDSON, *The Industrial Revolution*, London: Edward Arnold, 1992. xii+244 p.

24. See “Dunkirk Spirit gets lost in translation”, *BBC News*, 2 June 2000, online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/774678.stm>.

25. This is studied at interpersonal level by Georg SIMMEL (translated by Kurt H. WOLFF), *Conflict* (1908) [and] *The Web of Group Affiliations*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955, 195 p.

26. Teenage sons of Breton fishermen were left on the shores of Britain with a provision of onions to sell before their fathers came back from Newfoundland and took them home. This lasted well into the 1950s and is one of the reasons why the standard caricature of a Frenchman by the English is that of a man dressed with the horizontal stripes of a seaman's shirt and wearing garlands of onions around his neck—a reference which is entirely lost on most Frenchmen.

27. Andrew Thomas (Major-General Lord) (Baron Blayney) BLAYNEY, *Narrative of a Forced Journey through Spain and France as a Prisoner of War in the Years 1810 to 1814*, London: E. Kerby, 1814, 2 vol. (I:xvi+495; II:viii+504). Nathan PINKNEY, *Travels through the South of France, and in the interior of the provinces of Provence and Languedoc, in the years 1807 and 1808*, London: T. Purday, 1809, vi+282 p. René-Martin PILLET, *L'Angleterre vue à Londres et dans ses provinces, pendant un séjour de dix années, dont six comme prisonnier de guerre; par M. le Maréchal-de-camp Pillet, Chevalier de Saint-Louis, et Officier de la Légion d'Honneur*, Paris: Alexis Eymery, 1815, 498 p. Hugh CROW, *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool; Comprising a Narrative of his Life, together with Descriptive Sketches*

of the Western Coast of Africa; Particularly of Bonny; the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants, the Productions of the Soil, and the Trade of the Country. To which are added, Anecdotes and Observations, illustrative of the Negro Character. Compiled chiefly from his own manuscripts: with authentic additions from recent voyages and approved authors, London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green; Liverpool: G. & J. Robinson, 1830, xxxiv+316 p. Louis GARNERAY, *Voyages, aventures et combats* (1851-1853). *Le négrier de Zanzibar*, Paris: Phébus, 1985, 303 p.; *Voyages, aventures et combats* (1851-1853). *Un corsaire au bague (Mes Pontons)*, Paris: Phébus, 1985, 389 p.

28. Eric J. HOBSBAWM, “Where are British Historians Going?”, pp. 14-26 in *The Marxist Quarterly*, vol. 2, n° 1, January 1955.

29. In the late 19th c. French *lycées*, when the experiment was first conducted, it was found that the lack of professionalism meant so unruly classes that lessons had to be watched by a steward equipped with a club. Nonetheless, Mr Xavier Darcos, the present Secretary of State for Education in France, has announced at a pan-European venue, that school children would be offered a “linguistic immersion” without the cost of going abroad, thanks to camp holidays officered by young foreigners (26 Sept. 2008). It is sure everybody concerned will appreciate this great leap forward.

30. Thomas Babbington MACAULAY, in a review (Oct. 1840) of the then recently translated *Ecclesiastical and Political History of the Popes of Rome, during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* by Leopold RANKE. See Gutenberg.com to download *Critical and Historical Essays*, vol. 2. The reference to the New Zealander became a standard platform phrase well into the 1870s.

31. *Op. cit.*