
Further Thoughts on the Evaluation of Research in the Humanities (A Very Personal View)

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The paper “The Evaluation of Research” produced by the Board of the AIA (Associazione Italiana di Anglistica) and published in *The Messenger* in Spring 2009 (vol. 18.1) will hopefully encourage other national boards to consider this very urgent issue. In the meantime, I would like to offer a very personal view based mainly on the impression that the situation that the AIA describes – and the many complaints our Italian colleagues voice – are just the tip of the iceberg of our growing discomfort with the bureaucratisation of research in the humanities and, in particular, in English Studies.¹ Our frantic academic life-style has perhaps for too long prevented us from considering why and how we are producing research; the launching of ERIH (the European Reference Index for the Humanities) may well be the catalyst we need to rethink our task.

1. Rethinking journal lists

I basically agree with the criticism poured by the AIA on ERIH and I believe it was about time someone started voicing a truth that few dare acknowledge: English Studies is built on a hierarchical structure that privileges research produced in English-speaking universities and published in English. Just check any English Studies bibliography and see how many of the items included are published outside the UK or the USA (Canada and Australia, too) and in languages other than English. To be fair, apart from the strait-laced gatekeeping generated by the current system of peer reviewing of the many major international journals that the AIA boldly denounces, there is another potent factor at work locally in non-English speaking nations that contributes to the persistence of hierarchy: a reluctance to quote sources produced by local scholars, whether in English or in other languages. Instead of promoting local work of quality, translating quotations if necessary, we all tend to use the *same* Anglo-American secondary sources and in this way contribute to increasing their (supposed) impact. No wonder ERIH’s classification of journals shows a marked bias towards those published in the UK and the USA. And rightly so.

The AIA’s main concern, however, is not just this subtle international discrimination. The main matter their paper deals with is actually the possible (mis)use by national boards of ERIH’s journal

classification lists for the assessment of individual humanities researchers. Their well-grounded complaint is clear enough. ERIH stresses that their lists are just informative and refer exclusively to the journals; accordingly, ERIH notes that essays of quality can be found in any of them. Nevertheless, we all know that in practice the lists will be eventually used to assess the (unread) work of individual researchers. Databases have been used so far for similar purposes but what is blatant and perhaps even perverse in the current trends shaping research assessment is that quality is being evaluated on the basis of the publications’ *quantification*, and not of their actual *content*. The Spanish evaluation agency ANECA, for instance, requires candidates for accreditation² to enclose with their CV the first and the last pages of their journal articles, accompanied by impact indexes and other similar information. The voluntary assessment exercises we pass every six years do not even require that we send the photocopied pages – a summary is enough. Given this situation, no doubt due to the high amount of candidates that overworked committees must assess, it’s no wonder that classification journal lists are being welcomed (by evaluators, of course, rather than by researchers). Yet, as a Literature specialist, I can’t help thinking that this is equivalent to judging the book by its covers (or, probably even worse, by its publishers).

It might seem that a solution to this quandary would be simply rejecting assessment to focus instead on research, odd as this may sound. Tenured scholars with a solid trajectory but whose research is done in fields poorly reflected by ERIH (or other lists and databases) face in many cases deep professional crises as they struggle to follow their chosen career path *and* to adapt to the often conservative assessment demands of their national boards. I happen to know a few who have finally decided to carry on with their work on an individual basis – which can be done in the humanities, certainly not in the sciences – publish whatever and wherever they prefer and do without the (little) money that assessment may bring in rather than submit to what they regard as an unfair system. This form of inner exile is, of course, the privilege of those already tenured, but it might grow if the demands of the assessment boards become a way of policing research

rather than of acknowledging the effort it takes to produce it.

Our current research assessment methods are generating other worrying side-effects which, again, suggest that assessment is becoming a hindrance rather than an encouragement to do research in the humanities. Clare Brant, winner of the 2008 ESSE book award for Literature with her excellent *Eighteenth Century Letters and British Culture* (2006), commented in issue 17.2 of *The Messenger* that “Two Research Assessment Exercises took place while I laboured on my book. For both, I had to divert attention to short projects I could complete in the allotted time.” (19) If assessment interrupts research which might yield very good results in the long term, diverting, as we can see, the researcher’s attention, then, what good indeed is assessment? Even worse, as Brant’s comment implies, scholars in the humanities are beginning to distinguish between proper research carried out over long years, as this field requires, and hurried work completed at short notice to fulfil the immediate requirements of assessment (for *productivity*, rather than quality).

Beyond its effects on individual researchers, the “product collocation scenario” as the AIA calls it, or the bureaucratisation of research, as I call it, has also at least two pernicious effects on European English Studies *journals*. Suppose you are an enthusiastic scholar determined to launch a new journal because you believe that the map of knowledge shows a glaring gap. Amazingly, despite our limitations in time and funding this happens quite often, which is why, as the AIA notes, no journal database or list can ever be really complete. Just consider: who will want to publish in your newfangled, unrated journal (that is, except ‘rogue’ or self-exiled scholars, tenured or not)? Any scholar seeking to publish an essay will, logically, first check the ERIH list and aim at the highest-ranking journal – within his/her possibilities, of course. These top journals will have an ever-growing waiting list, while the new or the minor journals will languish, receiving just the left-overs of the A- and B-ranked journals. This, of course, is already happening as part of the academic pecking order but it will certainly be reinforced by ERIH (and by the current national research assessment methods).

The second pernicious effect refers to the ESSE journal database. Dr. Fritz Neumann and all the ESSE members who collaborated with him in its launching were seeking to offer not just a list or a map of the current English Studies journals in Europe but also a *tool* for building a truly European space for English Studies. The idea behind this – at least, the idea I

personally support – is that in the long run the phrase ‘international publication’ will cease to mean a publication in a UK or USA journal to mean a publication in a European journal of *any* nationality. Just as national journal lists, such as the one run by the Spanish English Studies association AEDEAN, may help scholars to place their work locally, the ESSE database may help European English Studies scholars to circulate their work internationally. It should also give visibility to the European English Studies journals published in countries other than the UK (and the USA) and, generally, increase the internationalisation – therefore, also the quality – of *any* of them. Yet, while the ESSE journal database aims at the consolidation of this ideally convergent European framework for research in English Studies, ERIH, I will insist, only consolidates its hierarchisation. Why, indeed, in view of ERIH, would a British scholar want to publish in, say, a Czech journal of English Studies? Perhaps even worse, why would a Czech scholar want to publish in an English Studies journal from Spain? Unless, of course, they were rated A or B, which, as the AIA explains, would be quite exceptional.

2. Reading journals essays in the internet age

Let’s forget assessment for a while to consider why we publish in journals and how we read them. Let’s get down to basics: an academic journal is a periodical publication that focuses on a topic and publishes essays related to it, filtered by an editorial board and/or peer-reviewed. It is supposed to be read regularly by subscribers and its point is to keep them updated on the topic of their interest. I wonder, though, how many individual subscribers are left in comparison to institutional ones due both to lack of time to read complete journal issues regularly and lack of money to afford the often impossibly expensive subscriptions. My guess is fewer and fewer. I do not believe I am alone in Europe in having become a *poacher* rather than a *reader* of journals. I assume that, like me, many colleagues download the essays of their choice either from the databases to which their universities subscribe or from the internet, paying for them – very reluctantly! – only when they are not available for free. For us journals are becoming just platforms for the publication of essays: their ranking is irrelevant as long as they offer motivating, *available* essays.

Here it’s necessary to introduce a little meditation on journal circulation and distribution, and on the meaning of the word ‘obscure’ as used in the sentence ‘her essay was published in an obscure Spanish journal.’ The internet has already taught us

that the meaning of ‘obscure local band’ changed radically after the appearance of *My Space* and the revolution it started in the popular music world. ERIH, however, seems to be a product of the pre-internet age. Recently, a colleague from the English Department of the Universitat de Barcelona shared with me his doubts as to the use of publishing the journal *BELLS* (*Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*). “Who reads *BELLS*?”, he wondered, unable to picture readers with a copy in their hands other than the authors. *BELLS* (unrated by ERIH, by the way) is, nonetheless, since 2003 when it went on-line, one of those journals which make research available for free (it’s very modestly funded with department money, that is, public money). Being indexed in the MLA, chances are its essays will be found just two mouse clicks further away by those who seek them, which is not always the case with ERIH’s A-ranking journals. On-line visibility doesn’t always mean on-line availability and my (possibly wild) guess is that younger scholars, used to seeing the net as a vast cost-free resource, might well choose to quote from free, available quality sources rather than pay for work published in A-ranking journals whose quality is not always guaranteed, as even ERIH points out.

Just as *My Space* and the widespread, free peer-to-peer sharing of music digital files (MP3) have complicated the survival of record companies despite the efforts of governments to contain piracy, similar academic internet environments and the soon-to-come ebook reader era *might* unleash a general crisis of the academic industries which could even lead to the eventual disappearance of journals. Musicians have discovered that they can publish their music on-line as soon as it is recorded without the intervention of any record company and ‘rogue’ humanities scholars might also find in self-publication an interesting option. Unlike musicians, who will have to play more concerts to make up for money lost due to dwindling record sales, we are backed by a salary and, anyway, only a few of us make money out of their publications (out of books, not journals). Many humanities scholars already have personal websites where essays previously published on paper in journals or in collective books have been made available, while doctoral thesis in any field are being now published in the internet as soon as they are submitted. Technology, in short, already allows us to establish networks of scholars connected by similar interests that might choose to share their work online for free as soon as it is written. This is a vision that might irk many but it is, nonetheless, a feasible scenario. And if it has not

happened yet, this is because *where* we publish has a strange priority over *what* we publish.

3. Some final thoughts

It would be, of course, next to impossible to assess self-published academic work. To many this may sound like pure anarchy: academic work downgraded to the level of blogs. It seems quite clear, though, that journal publication operates on lines in urgent need of revision that even ERIH’s work highlights. I am *not* calling here for an end to peer-reviewing, journal publication and research assessment, not at all: they are *basic* to our task. But I am indeed calling, as the AIA does in their paper, for a *re-assessment* of their current workings, bearing in mind not only the dissatisfaction that many English Studies scholars feel about them but also current and future technological changes whose depth is barely understood today. In its current stage, research assessment verifies our access to certain lines of distribution within English Studies, which might soon radically change anyway, but not the *content* or *quality* of our research. And as a Literature teacher I know very well that this little something called reputation, a word never used in assessment research, is never easy to gauge, much less to quantify in detail.

My impression is that this current hierarchisation of research, of which ERIH is just a sample, is generating a *disillusioned* academic atmosphere in the humanities; the system of rewarding achievement simply does not fit the perception we have of our own methods and work. All scholars need some form of acknowledgement as our egos, which are our main support, are frail and much more so in the humanities, since we are cannot be motivated by our society’s scant expectations about our work, if indeed our society cares at all. Yet, humanities scholars are being assessed with tools that show a radical misunderstanding of how and why we work, and we suffer for that from an anxiety unknown to our peers in other fields.

As regards English Studies scholars born and working outside the British Isles, we run the risk of becoming *less* rather than more visible both at a European and at a local level. I often feel schizophrenic, as publishing in Spanish about English Studies makes me invisible in the eyes of my European colleagues while publishing in English makes me invisible for my Spanish colleagues and, well, hardly visible for my European peers anyway. I also feel, but that must be my own insecurity, that we are automatically ranked second to any native English-speaking scholar or those based in Britain

(or the USA). ERIH's lists only increase that impression. This needn't be so at all, as, for instance, the field of Spanish Studies shows.

We need to be assessed for obvious reasons, I have no doubt about this, as too many have abused the academic system for too long, but we must find a way to be assessed generically, as regards *all* our activities as humanities scholars and not only research. In Spain and, I assume, also in most European countries, research, teaching and management activities are periodically assessed but this is done *separately* which, in my view, makes it impossible to excel in any of them. I would be in favour, rather, of giving a periodical account of *all* our activities to the corresponding board, making comprehensive self-assessment and career coherence essential instead of the increasing quantification of just a selection of our activities.

As for ERIH, it is, in a way, both redundant and extremely dangerous. Redundant, because part of

being a specialist in a field is knowing which publications enjoy a high reputation in it, an ability which also allows one to judge the work of researchers in the same field. And dangerous because it can be used too dogmatically for assessment by national boards, as the AIA and I myself have argued. As an informative instrument, ERIH does have an enormous potential but then it must always be understood as a *descriptive* – never prescriptive – instrument. The AIA's complaint fails to stress, perhaps, an equally important point: in its urge to describe the vast field of the Humanities ERIH has distorted it beyond recognition by forgetting about its many subdivisions. You might be surprised after all this discussion to discover that the current 2008 list of journals (to be replaced by the end of 2009) includes lists for 'Linguistics' and for 'Literature' but not for 'English Studies'. And if we do not exist for ERIH (or not yet), complex and varied as we are, why should ERIH matter?

NOTES

1. I am a specialist in English Literature and Cultural Studies and I am fully aware that the argumentation offered here might not apply at all to the area of English Language and Linguistics. In my view, although we all produce science in the sense of knowledge, the methods differ widely, which surely explains the increasing divergence of these two main areas within English Studies.
2. This is an aptitude certification compulsory to obtain temporary work contracts or tenured positions in Spanish universities, which are mostly public.

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Introducing the *Oxford History of the Novel in English*

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In these days of instant access to huge stores of information, it takes a brave publisher to commission a multi-volume, multi-contributor scholarly reference work that will take years to produce—a standard printed resource intended to last for decades. But that is what Oxford University Press is doing with the *History of the Novel in English* (*OHONE* for short), of which I am General Editor. What is *OHONE*, and how will it change our understanding of the history of the novel?

Why do we need a new *Oxford History*? There have been numerous short, one-volume histories of the English novel, including those written by distinguished novelists such as Ford Madox Ford and Malcolm Bradbury. There are Guides and Companions, as well as critical studies ostensibly covering a wide chronological range but actually whittling down the history of the novel in English to a few key authors and texts. On world fiction there is Margaret Anne Doody's recent attempt on the novel's 'true history', and Franco Moretti's three volumes of brilliant and erudite essays by a range of contributors. But what we do not have is an up-to-date, comprehensive, scholarly history of the novel in English with the breadth of field and attention to detail that the subject requires. The last multi-volume study of the history of the genre was Ernest A. Baker's *History of the English Novel*, published in ten volumes between 1924 and 1939. Baker's study did not even take the story up to 1939, or anywhere near it, and not only have an awful lot of novels been written and published since then but our whole understanding of the genre has been transformed.

Ernest Baker's ten volumes have their strengths as well as fairly obvious limitations, but the most remarkable thing about them is that they were the work of one man. A new history, bringing the story up to date and covering the vastly extended geographical range of modern English-language fiction, must necessarily draw on the resources of a large international team of scholars. When I discussed this with Andrew McNeillie, our original commissioning editor at Oxford University Press, we decided to go for a series of edited volumes, each with over thirty contributors, rather than for single-author narrative volumes like those in the recent *Oxford English Literary History*. *OHONE* is thus a collaborative venture drawing on the wealth of contemporary scholarship and analytical insight

into the novel *in all its forms*—a point that I'll come back to. But it is also a work of popularization in the sense that we are aiming for a diverse and long-term readership. We need to provide basic information for new students of the field, without making too many presumptions about the reader's previous knowledge. These are features that we are working hard to incorporate into our editorial guidelines and practice.

What is the novel, and when did it start? Students all over the world are still being taught that English fiction began with *Robinson Crusoe*, but the first volume of *OHONE* (edited by Thomas Keymer) will contain several chapters on Elizabethan fiction and earlier, including a brief survey of novel production between 1506 and 1510. Nevertheless, we are firmly committed to a working definition of the novel as a modern phenomenon, broadly of the last five hundred years. The extraordinary growth of the novel during the last five centuries would have been unthinkable without the spread of habits of silent, private reading. Not only was this a comparatively late development in the history of literacy, but it is at the heart of one of the greatest of the early novels, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Novels are not always read silently and in private, but they are typically commercial products dependent on the technology of printing, on the availability of leisure time, and the circulation of books. They differ fundamentally from all forms of literature that come to fruition in performance rather than in the act of reading. They also differ, though in much more complex and essentially debatable ways, from the numerous non-fictional forms of prose literature. This is why cross-generic works like the *Oxford English Literary History*, for all its merits, will never do justice to the distinctiveness, the continuity, and the specific cultural importance of the novel. The need for separate histories of the novel form has, indeed, long been recognized.

Our history of the novel should be comprehensive, but it cannot of course be exhaustive, or anything like it—that is a task for bibliography rather than for narrative history. History has a commemorative function, but cultural memory is necessarily selective and we remember some things at the cost of forgetting others. So literary history always has a critical basis, and, as the poet and critic Donald Davie rather controversially once wrote, many books

and authors are ‘eminently [and] properly forgettable; and nothing is gained by rescuing these from the oblivion that they deserve’.¹ How far should we go along with that, given that a huge amount of recent literary scholarship has been devoted to rescuing works that had been undeservedly forgotten? An example of this process of ‘rescue archaeology’ from the volume I am myself co-editing—on British and Irish fiction between 1880 and 1940—will help to bring this issue into focus.

In the course of researching the Chatto & Windus publishing archive at the University of Reading, my colleague Dr Nicola Wilson came upon a 1913 review in the *Daily Mail* in which Horace W. C. Newte, one of Chatto’s novelists, was hailed as a ‘Zola of the suburbs’. ‘Suburban fiction’ is now recognized as a growth area in the early twentieth century, surveyed for example in Lynne Hapgood’s 2005 study *Margins of Desire*, but it is safe to say that, but for this discovery, Horace Newte would have remained totally forgotten.² As it is, his achievement will rate a few lines in Volume 4 of *OHONE*—but no more than a few lines. Literary ‘rescue archaeology’ is only valuable insofar as what is rescued remains capable of arousing our interest and curiosity, and our task as historians is to show how and why the works we commemorate do this. At the same time, we need to be alert to a wider range of different kinds of interest and curiosity than most earlier literary historians have been.

This brings me to the relationship between *OHONE* and contemporary readers; perhaps also contemporary and future novelists. Is it by accident or design that our project has been conceived both in the early years of a new century, and at a time when new technologies are seen to be threatening the dominance of the printed book? Some of us will remember that thirty or forty years ago there was quite a spate of gloomy articles with titles like ‘The plight of the novelist’, ‘Is the novel dying?’, ‘The end of grand narratives’. But the novel did not die. As has happened several times in the past, the novel as an international form was virtually reinvented in the later twentieth century. We no longer hear about the terminal novel, or the novel to end all novels, whatever the impact that Proust and Joyce (for example) may have had in their times. Rather like the Irish hod-carrier revived with a drop of whiskey in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, the novel, if it ever seemed to be a corpse, has come back from the dead, and everyone now knows (to adapt Mark Twain) that the reports of its death were exaggerated. So our history will be a celebration of the novel’s richness, and certainly not an elegy. It will be a summary of

modern scholarship but it is also bound to be supplanted one day by further scholarship and new creative inventions.

OHONE will offer something very different in kind and scope from histories of the novel in the past. The overall scope of the series is based on a necessary recognition that the novel in English is now (and has been for the last century) a truly global phenomenon; of this more later. But there are also two specific differences which are being built into the design of every volume in the series. The first is that every volume contains chapters on book history, discussing the history of novels as commodities and material objects at the relevant place and time, the ways in which they were produced, distributed, and read, and the history of novel-writing as a profession and source of income. There has been an extraordinary efflorescence of book history research in recent years; we aim both to profit from this development and to extend it, seeking to reunite the study of the material book with mainstream literary scholarship. Secondly, we are committed to a comprehensive history of fiction going beyond the mainstream ‘literary’ novel. In the terminology of the Russian Formalists we are canonizing the ‘junior branches’ of fiction—all of them, or, at least, as many as we can manage. Each volume covers the history of popular fiction and of the fictional sub-genres within the chosen period. Of course, we also aim to cover relations between the novel and separate forms of (mainly) prose writing such as satire and autobiography; relations between English-language fiction and the novel in other languages; relations between the novel and short forms such as the story and the novella (which, for our purposes—I stress for our purposes—we treat both as sub-genres of the novel and as aspects of its material history); relations, too, between novel-writing and the critical understanding of fiction at different periods. But we know from Henry James that really and universally relations are infinite, so that the editors of each volume have to make clear decisions about where to draw boundaries. Not all these decisions can or should be uncontroversial, but the least we can say is that we will be more inclusive than any previous history of the novel. There is to my knowledge no comparable project for the history of the novel in English as a whole, though we do face competition in particular areas such as the history of the American novel.

Finally I come to the overall design of the series, a design that has been continually evolving as the original projected nine volumes grew to twelve. Five of these volumes cover British and Irish fiction from

its origins to the twenty-first century, with chronological divisions at 1750, 1820, 1880 (thus deliberately breaking up the supposedly monolithic entity of the 'Victorian novel'), and 1940. The three volumes on United States fiction, devised with the help of our US Consulting Editor Jonathan Arac, divide at 1870 and 1940. Planning the four volumes covering 'World Fiction in English' has been our most challenging task, involving extensive consultation including, finally, a brief 'summit meeting' at the 'Narrative Dominions' conference in London in July 2009. A single volume covers the 'world novel' in the British colonial period up to 1950; thereafter, we have resorted to geographical divisions, with separate post-1950 volumes devoted to the novel in Asia, to Africa and the Atlantic World, and to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the Pacific. The last category, the Pacific, foregrounds one of the issues we have to consider: how many Europeans know, for instance, that there is a flourishing Novel in English in the Philippines which

is now an object of scholarly study? And of how many other non-Commonwealth nations might that be true?

With the most advanced of our twelve volumes scheduled for delivery to the publisher in early 2010, the series is due to appear from 2011 onwards. At the time of writing six volumes are in active production, with four others at the commissioning stage and potential (as yet unconfirmed) editors identified for the last two. 'Literary history' is the established name for the discipline of literary studies in various European languages, yet in the English-speaking world for a long time criticism and theory held sway, and literary history (including Ernest Baker's work, fairly or unfairly) had a somewhat fusty feel to it. Scholars did not rush to define themselves as literary historians. All that, I believe, is now changing, and one of my hopes for *OHONE* is that it will come to be seen as part of a wider movement re-establishing literary history at the core of English studies.

NOTES

Patrick Parrinder's most recent book is *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day* (Oxford University Press, 2006). He has published widely on modern literature, science fiction, and utopian fiction, and was one of the organisers of ESSE's founding conference in 1990 at the University of East Anglia. He is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Reading. The present article is a revised version of his opening address at the 'Narrative Dominions' conference held in July 2009 at the Institute of English Studies, University of London.

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